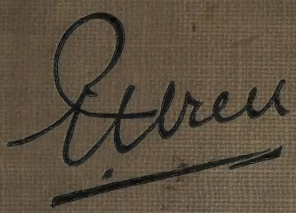
THE MAMMON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS



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THE MAMMON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

BY THE SAME AUTHOR

BEAU GESTE
BEAU SABREUR
BEAU IDEAL
GOOD GESTES
SOLDIERS OF MISFORTUNE
THE WAGES OF VIRTUE
STEPSONS OF FRANCE
SNAKE AND THE SWORD
FATHER GREGORY
DEW AND MILDEW
DRIFTWOOD SPARS
THE YOUNG STAGERS

THE MAMMON OF RIGHTEOUSNESS

THE STORY OF COXE AND THE BOX

BY

PERCIVAL CHRISTOPHER WREN

"L'inglese italianato
'E il diavolo incarnato."

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THE OUTER BOOK

PART I

SERVING AS A PROLOGUE

PROLOGUE

I

IN the largest of the studies of the Head Master's House at one of the greatest English Public Schools, five boys, Mortimer, Tattinger, Fortescue, John Desart and Clarence Coxe, sat about the fire, one Saturday night, munching biscuits and drinking the cocoa that the two hosts, Mortimer and Tattinger, had brewed.

Mortimer, known for some long-forgotten reason as Milly, a tall thin dark youth, somewhat elegant of person, soft and suave of speech, Head of the House and Captain of Cricket, was also the acknowledged head and leader of this little coterie.

They, diverse of character as five boys could be, had come from the same Preparatory School and had together gone up the ladder of this their Public School, step by step, until, still united, they had reached the Sixth form and their last term.

Mortimer's close familiar friend and stable-companion, Richard Tattinger—known as Scrub

by reason of the general scrubby effect achieved by short, wiry, sandy hair, snub nose, freckles, big mouth and ears, and general untidiness, was, according to John Desart, reminiscent of a thoroughbred fox-terrier ; while Mortimer rather suggested a greyhound. In further pursuit of his doggy similes, he saw in the third of the Mortimer-Tattinger-Fortescue trio, an admirable specimen of the British bull-dog.

In this also was he justified, for Fortescue, affectionately known as Tub, was a powerfully-built thick-set youth, with bull-neck, bandy legs, jutting chin and jaw, and a look of grim determination.

His pleasing and attractive smile disclosed small even teeth, the lower row of which protruded slightly beyond the upper.

Of the five, these three were the inner circle, the inseparables. The two others, John Desart and Clarence Coxe, had little in common with the trio and nothing with each other, save the accident of a decade of communal life and mutual experience.

Clarence Coxe, a pasty-faced pimply lumpish boy, was, according to John Desart, a poodle ; in fact, a pooh-poodle ; a good quiet house-trained dog, easily taught to sit up and beg, and to perform any other trick requiring little intelligence and less effort.

As that of young people is apt to be, John

Desart's criticism was harsh and intolerant, albeit Clarence Coxe undeniably possessed more of the traits and attributes of the lap-dog than of the greyhound, terrier, or bull-dog.

Silent because he had little to say and less desire to say it; clumsy and bad at games because he was nervous and self-distrustful; only moderately good in class because he was rather unintelligent and somewhat lazy, Clarence Coxe was tolerated rather than beloved by the other four; and ignored, because overlooked rather than despised, by the remainder of the Sixth and the School in general.

Son of the Rector of Avesbury, his highest ambition—to scrape through school without being superannuated and to get a Fourth in Theology at Oxford—seemed likely to be fulfilled.

When, amused if not complimented, by John Desart's canine classifications, the others enquired as to what particular sort of dog he considered himself to be, Desart would reply that he was no special and particular kind of dog—just a dog—in the same sense that the House jam was no special particular and identifiable kind of jam, but just jam.

Clarence Coxe had somewhat surlily asked this question when kindly informed by Desart that he was an utter poodle, and, on learning that Desart was no particular kind of dog had, for him, quite brilliantly, observed:

"Certainly not a very particular dog . . . No; dirty dog, perhaps," introducing, as usual, the only jarring note; and, as usual, incurring a sharp rebuke from Scrub Tattinger, who, at times, quite obviously hated him.

This John Desart, son of a great and famous Edinburgh physician, by far the cleverest of the five, proposed to follow in his father's footsteps and, by way of Harley Street, attain rank, fame and fortune as King's Physician, Knight, Baronet, and Peer.

After exhaustive discussion of the afternoon's match, in which all but Clarence Coxe had played, a brief silence fell, as four comfortably tired and happily weary boys stared into the fire and fought the battle o'er again.

"Oh, for Heaven's sake, keep your foot still, Poodle," cried Scrub Tattinger suddenly and irritably, as he sat up and stared angrily at Clarence Coxe who, for the thousandth time, was offending by his unconquerable habit of crossing the left leg over the right and swinging the left foot up and down, swiftly, steadily and endlessly.

"Anyone got a bit of string?" continued Scrub Tattinger.

"I know where to put my hand on a piece of blind-cord," said Mortimer. "What do you want it for?"

"To tie Coxe's filthy foot to the coal-scuttle . . . Perhaps that'll keep his beastly hoof still for five minutes . . . Come on, get the cord, Milly."

Clarence Coxe arose and departed thence.

"A weak silent man," observed Scrub Tattinger, as the door closed. "Better than the strong silent sort, I suppose."

"You are hard on him, Scrub," observed Fortescue.

"Oh, Clarence Dashwood Coxe annoys me beyond speech."

"Not beyond speech, Scrub—unfortunately," remarked John Desart.

"Anyhow I could say a jolly sight more than I do," said Tattinger. "He reminds me of my mother's cook."

"In beauty or gentle femininity?"

"No. What I mean is—my mother's had our cook for twenty years. Hated her on sight when she engaged her, and has hated her more and more every day ever since."

The others laughed.

"Beauty!" continued Scrub Tattinger with a grunt. "Femininity I grant you. There's more of the makings of a man in his cousin Minerva Coxe's little finger than in our Clarence's whole body."

"Yes, they're changelings, I should think. Minerva certainly ought to have been a boy," observed Mortimer.

"Thank Heaven she isn't," observed Scrub Tattinger.

"No, that wouldn't do, Scrubby lad, would it?" laughed Fortescue.

"Did you hear that yarn that she's unofficially engaged to Clarence?" he continued mischievously. "Only a rumour, of course, but she had him in her pocket all last hols."

"A *canard*, as the learned say," remarked Mortimer softly.

"A damned lie," almost shouted Scrub Tattinger.

"Hoots, laddie, why this warmth, this wrath, this excitement?" jeered John Desart.

"Hush, Long John, your question is indiscreet. You tread on a hidden corn—I mean sacred ground," said Fortescue.

"Hidden corn growing in sacred ground, perhaps," murmured Mortimer.

"And fools rush in where poor old Scrub simply doesn't dare to tread."

"Sorry, Scrub," smiled John Desart. "You lads of the same village have your little local intrigues and scandals with which I am unacquent."

"What the devil d'you mean—intrigues and scandals?" asked Scrub Tattinger haughtily and with a dignity sadly marred by a heavy and well-aimed cushion.

"Chuck it, children," ordered Mortimer, "and let Poodle Coxe alone.

"For the old firm of Mortimer, Tattinger, Fortescue, Desart and Coxe is about to break up, alas," he continued . . . "You won't be troubled with him much longer, Scrub."

"You three will be at Sandhurst next year," said John Desart, "I shall be a medical student and Poodle Coxe an undergraduate. When shall we five meet again?"

"Tell you where we four will meet again, anyhow," put in Mortimer. "Look. Our three fathers—mine, Tattinger's and Fortescue's—are members of the Pelham, and we're down for it. In spite of its being a most exclusive club, we'll be able to squeeze you in, Long John. Then we're bound to meet from time to time."

"Yes," agreed Fortescue, "we'll have reunion dinners when Milly and Scrub are home from Africa, and I from India. We're bound to coincide sometimes."

"Splendid," said John Desart. "I'll toddle round from Harley Street to your Loafers' Home. And we'll talk over old times . . . 'Forty Years On,' and all that."

"What about Poodle Coxe?" he added.

"Oh, leave him out of it," said Scrub Tattinger. "We've had all the Clarence Dashwood Coxe we want."

II

A runner had arrived with the mails at the stockaded post of Kinguna, a month's desert journey from the railway.

Clad only in a sleeveless khaki shirt, shorts, puttees, hob-nailed boots and a sun-helmet, Captain "Milly" Mortimer, of the King's African Rifles, crossed from his hut to where his comrade Scrub Tattinger sat outside his tent and stared at a letter that he held in his hand.

"Got one from Tubby Fortescue," said Mortimer, as he drew near, reading as he walked, and without looking at his friend.

"He's got his Ghurka Double Company. Says he'd love to 'pit them against a Double Company of our Nyassaland Yaos, who are supposed to be the Ghurkas of Africa, of course.'"

Still reading, and without looking at his companion, he seated himself beside him. Then, dropping the letter, he stared before him, absent-mindedly, out upon the dusty parade-ground where a coal-black Sergeant-Major was drilling a squad of African soldiers of fairer complexion.

"I'll tell you what it is, Scrub," he said, coming back to earth and the present. "It's all wrong, having these Soudanese non-commissioned officers in charge of Abyssinians and Somalis . . . 'Course they're just about the finest soldiers in the world, but they oughtn't to be put over those chaps. It's really almost on a par with putting Indian Mussalman or Hindu officers over British Tommies . . . Soudanese are looked upon as slave-people in Abyssinia and Somaliland. The Gallas absolutely despise them. I'm going to take jolly good care to get some Abyssinians promoted to Sergeant and . . . Hullo, what's up?"

Realizing that his friend had made no reply to any of his remarks, Mortimer turned to look at him, and saw that something was very wrong indeed.

"What is it, Dicky?" he asked softly.

Tattinger was staring straight before him, unseeing, unhearing, a look of stunned amazement on his set face, which had paled to a greyish pallor beneath its tan.

He looked stricken: as though he had received a mortal wound.

"What's up, Scrub? What's the matter?" asked Mortimer again, laying his hand on Tattinger's arm.

Tattinger made neither movement nor reply.

Alarmed at the look upon his friend's face, Mortimer sprang up and gently shook him.

Had he been bitten by a *mamba* as he sat there?

"What's *wrong*, Dicky? What's up?"

And then Tattinger seemed to collapse upon himself, as he bowed his face into his hands.

"It isn't true . . ." he whispered. "It can't be . . . Minerva couldn't do *that* . . . Not *Minerva* . . ."

The letter that he had been holding fell to the ground, and Mortimer recognized its bold firm handwriting.

Scrub's girl . . . Minerva Coxe . . . Coming out to marry him as soon as it could be managed . . .

"What's happened, Dicky?" he asked.

"Go away, Milly," was the only reply; and rising, Tattinger entered his tent and closed the flap.

Of Scrub Tattinger it might be said, as once upon a time of a King of England, that he was not seen to smile again, nor ever heard to laugh. Certainly not by his friend Mortimer, who was in fairly close touch with him for the next five-and-twenty years, and was with him when he died.

III

A tall lean brown-complexioned man, soldierly of face and figure, crossed from the Pelham Club dining-room to the huge lounge, and, as he stood stuffing his pipe, gazed around the well-remembered room which on that bright May morning he now entered again for the first time after a big-game shooting-trip in the beloved Africa from whose service he had retired.

Same great old leather arm-chairs; same great old leather-faced steward; same great old heads of lion, buffalo, ibex, oryx, eland and kudu . . . And, by Jove, great old Tubby Fortescue!

Striding across to where Tubby sat, deep in an arm-chair and a book, Colonel Mortimer murmured in his usual soft deceptive voice:

"Got a match, Tub?"

Major Fortescue gave one look and one leap from his chair.

"Well, I am d-d-d-d . . ." he stuttered, as he seized his friend's hand.

Colonel Mortimer nodded.

"You are, Tub," he whispered.

"Delighted, I was going to say," continued

Major Fortescue. "When didjer get back, Milly? Have any luck? Got any genuine record heads?"

"Every one, Tub. Got the biggest mouse-deer antlers ever lassoed. Colossal. How's Mrs. Tub?"

Later it transpired that, throughout his last big-game shooting-trip, Colonel "Milly" Mortimer had had only one experience worth recording, and that a rather ghastly one. Very ghastly, in fact.

The elephants that he had shot had behaved in the usual manner; no lion had laid an unkind claw upon him; every rhinoceros that had charged had done so with the usual impetuous enthusiasm and lack of finesse which so commonly lead to lack of result; no wounded buffalo had lain in wait for him; not a single *mamba* had bitten him; although he had fagged right across to the Belgian Congo and back to Mount Makeno in Tanganyika Territory, he had failed to find an okapi and had not encountered a single gorilla.

No, life had been rather dull, monotonous and uneventful until he had met Scrub Tattinger, and that had been the occasion of the one interesting experience of the three years' trip.

Yes, painfully interesting . . . Really most amazing . . . Astounding. And absolutely awful.

"Dear old Scrub's still alive and going strong, then, eh?" mused Major Fortescue, smiling reminiscently.

"No, that's just what he's not," replied Colonel Mortimer, gravely. "And on the whole you'll agree with me that it's a good job too—if he was going to live the rest of his life in the condition in which he was when I found him. Yes, poor Scrub's dead all right. I buried him myself."

"Drink?"

"No . . . No . . . No worse than you, Tub."

"What, not gone native?"

"No . . . No more than he'd been ever since he retired from the King's African Rifles. When I spoke of the condition he was in, I rather meant to imply mental condition. He'd got something truly appalling on his mind. Called himself a murderer and worse. Smote himself on the chest and groaned in the middle of the night—the night that I joined up with him—and the small hours of the morning, just when I was getting my beauty sleep. He wouldn't tell me about it, at first. Said he had only just found it out and must think—or try to. And he was in the greatest haste and hurry to reach a water-hole before the raiders did. But he was in absolute agony of mind for the next day or two, until he was killed."

"Don't wonder at it, either," he added. "Tell you by and by when we're a bit more private . . . Make you sit up."

"Good Lord! *Poor* old Scrub," said Major Fortescue. "Poor old Scrubby. I can't take it in.

"Our old Scrub *dead*," he added. "And calling himself a murderer. What had he been up to—giving way to that red-haired temper of his, and shooting-up the black brother? I've often felt like it myself on safari, and nearly done it, too, 'specially the faithful porter who pours away the petrol, totters along all day with an empty tin on his head, and fills it with water at night."

"Yes," smiled Colonel Mortimer, "or the stout lad who empties away your last bottle of gin, because why should the Bwana carry water about with him when he's trekking by a river?"

"No," he continued. "Scrub hadn't been shooting anybody, and . . .

"By Jove, here's old Long John," he interrupted himself, as another member, the great and famous neurologist, Doctor John Desart, approached, beaming, with outstretched hand.

"Well, well, well, so you're back, eh, Mortimer," said Long John Desart, as he warmly shook the hand of his old friend.

"Delighted to see you again, old chap. By

Jove, you look fit! 'Pon my soul, I think I'll drop everything and come with you, next time."

"Splendid," whispered Colonel Mortimer. "Nothing I should like better. But what about the health of London if you abandon it for three years?"

"Oh, I couldn't make a three-year do of it. Wish I could. But I might be able to come for long enough to miss a lion and then scuttle home and talk about it for the rest of my life."

"Meaning that that's what I do?" smiled Colonel Mortimer.

"Well, no . . . You may miss 'em, of course, but you certainly don't come home and talk about it . . . Now, sit you down and do a bit of talking just for once, and I'll give myself a whole hour's holiday. Tell us all about it."

"What, all I've done in three years?"

"No, skim the cream of it. Tell us about each record head . . . and its last words . . . and all about everything."

"Yes, go it, Milly," adjured Major Fortescue as he drew his cigar-case from the side-pocket of his coat.

"And tell us about poor Scrub Tattinger's murder," he added.

"Scrub Tattinger *murdered*?" exclaimed the doctor. "Why, it seems only the other day he was sitting in that chair!"

"No, no," replied Major Fortescue. "But Mortimer was just telling me that he's dead, poor chap. No, it isn't the murder of Tattinger, but a murder by, with, from or about . . . Milly was just going to tell me about it all when you arrived."

"Scrub *dead*!" ejaculated John Desart incredulously.

Colonel Mortimer nodded, frowning, with down-drawn lips.

"Look here, you chaps, it's pretty bad . . . pretty awful . . . Draw up a bit closer . . . I've been thinking about it for weeks, on my way home, and have decided to tell you both."

"Poor Scrub said:

"'Tell Long John. He's a doctor and all that.'

"Then he said:

"'If you and Long John don't agree, call in Tubby Fortescue . . .' Sort of casting-vote idea.

"I needn't say that the story will die with us and not another soul will ever know. Part of the story, anyhow—where it concerns a woman. The other part must be blazoned abroad . . . In the Press . . .

"I suppose Clarence Coxe isn't in the Club, by the way?" he added.

"Yes, he is," replied Major Fortescue, "and

he'll be in here any minute now. Always puts up in the club Chambers when he's in Town."

"Shouldn't have thought he'd have cared to show his face, poor devil, since that terrible business . . . Enough to kill a man like him. Should have thought he'd have buried himself alive, somewhere."

"Yes, one would," agreed Major Fortescue. "I rather fancy Minerva sends him here; makes him 'hold his head high' as she would say . . . Face it out, and live it down."

"Does *she* do any facing it out and living it down, herself?" enquired Colonel Mortimer.

"No . . . er . . . no; one can't say she does," replied John Desart. "I gather she's not been out of Melfont Parva Vicarage since it happened . . . Tell us about poor Scrub . . . I haven't really grasped it yet . . . Scrub *dead*?"

"Yes, and with a most shocking confession on his lips . . . Not exactly a confession, either, really. But terrible . . . terrible . . . About poor young Algernon Coxe."

"Look out," whispered Major Fortescue, touching Colonel Mortimer's ankle with his foot, as a grey-faced haggard-looking man, in clerical dress, approached.

"Good God! How the poor chap's aged," murmured Colonel Mortimer, rising and shaking

the hand of his old school-fellow—or what he mentally termed the wreck of his old school-fellow—whose fine black beard and hair had, since he last saw him, turned almost white.

"Glad to see you back, Mortimer," said the Reverend Clarence Coxe. "Had a good time?" and he giggled foolishly and wrung his hands.

Seating himself and gnawing his nails, he added, with a painful nervous jerkiness of speech and manner:

"Tell us about your shooting trip. Come on, Milly, do tell us. All about the Best Beasts and Blackest Kings and Emperors."

And he cackled with mirthless laughter, uncomfortable to hear.

Doctor John Desart eyed him with sombre and professional interest. The man was evidently on the verge of a nervous breakdown.

"Come on, Milly, spin a great yarn. All about what you've seen and done and got," continued the reverend gentleman and began violently to swing his crossed leg.

"Oh, I don't know. Got one or two decent lions and two or three goodish heads and some tusks. Nothing much," replied the Colonel coldly.

"Exactly how many lions did you shoot?"

"Eight."

"Lions, large, black-maned, sportsmen for the use of, eight . . . Any records?" observed

the Reverend Clarence Coxe with forced and feeble humour.

"Oh, I don't know . . . Goodish sable antelope . . ."

"Record?"

"Might be."

"Did you poach your elephants?"

"Yes . . . on toast."

"Did you get into the Reserve or Portuguese territory and poach?"

"Oh, don't ask silly questions, Coxe," interrupted Major Fortescue impatiently. John Desart frowned at the Major, and shook his head in rebuke, for he knew something of what the pitiable man was suffering.

"Well," sighed the reverend gentleman, "that's about all we shall hear of your big-game shooting experience, I suppose. What about all your upper-class Kings and Emperors?"

"Oh, I don't know. I barged into Abyssinia a bit. But the most interestin' monarch I encountered wore a very natty gent's bowler hat with an ostrich feather sticking straight up in front," replied Colonel Mortimer.

"Anything else?" enquired the Reverend Clarence Coxe.

"Yes, of all things on this earth, a perfectly good cricket-pad."

"An old Blue?"

"No, an old devil."

"What did he do?"

"Oh, I don't know. Passed round the word for a boycott, cut off supplies and chucked things at us, at sunrise and evening star."

"What sort of things?"

"Spears. Nasty little arrows. Poisoned."

"What did you do? Shoot him up?" enquired Major Fortescue.

"Good Lord, no. I love those old-fashioned chaps. Not too many of 'em left nowadays. Gentlemen of the old school. What with aeroplanes, wireless, television and all that tripe, the place is getting spoilt.

"Why, I met a poor lad trekking with a load of alarm-clocks, dollar watches, mouth-organs, beads, brass-wire and red-flannel. Going to make his fortune. First tribal chief he came to offered him a cigar and a cocktail and said he'd cast an eye over his stock.

"'Good,' said the lad. 'Plenty much good ju-ju got. Great big ting-a-ling loud watch-clock hang round neck. All people say Massa be one Big King . . .'

"'*Can* it!' said the Paramount Chief of the Wa-bobubo. 'Show us the doings.'

"And when the lad made his show-down of his best Brummagem trade-goods and near-gold and almost-diamond jewellery, the Chief laughed long and loud as he scratched his ribs.

"'*Hell*, Bo,' he said. 'Haven't you *one*

portable wireless, or cine-camera, nor even a decent gramophone? Well, well, sit down a minute, while I send the kids along . . .' "

" How are the Masai behaving nowadays? " enquired Major Fortescue.

" Poor fellows! Going the way of the Zulus. No one to fight, and not even allowed to fight among themselves."

" Getting civilized. Soon have gorblimey caps and hobnailed boots, I expect."

" Well, now, plain answer to a plain question, Milly. Did you or did you not have any adventures with natives? " pursued the Reverend Clarence Coxe, his right foot oscillating with the speed and regularity of a pendulum.

" Oh, I don't know . . . Adventures . . . Natives of where? "

" Oh, you're hopeless."

" Well, I don't want to offer hope. How do you mean—adventures? . . . *Do* sit still, man . . ."

Again John Desart frowned, caught the Colonel's eye and shook his head. Clarence Coxe was to be humoured and handled gently.

" Well, did you or did your men ever have occasion to fire a single shot at a black brother? " he asked.

" Oh, we had a bit of fun up Lake Rudolf way. The K.A.R. had got a couple of little columns out after the old firm that raids down

from Southern Abyssinia to the Turkhana country. Besides slaughter, slavery, rape and arson they trap elephants in pits, leave them to starve, and then hack their tusks out—often before they are dead . . . Real choice band, that. Finest collection of prize stiffs on the face of the earth."

"What sort?"

"Oh, Abyssinian outlaws. Arab slave-traders and ivory-poachers, black hunters, soldiers, 'wanted' criminals, and bad lads from all the fighting tribes of those parts. Savage cruel devils. Regular bad hats."

"And you went along to see the fun, eh?" said Major Fortescue.

"Well, I had got *khubbar* of a white man with a big well-armed safari, and being a bit short on one or two things, we trekked for him. And blessed if it wasn't old Scrub Tattinger jogging along to take a hand.

"Quite unofficial of course, but old Scrub wasn't going to be out of it when the K.A.R. were up against his old pals the Abyssinian border-raiders, who did-in Scrub's best sub-altern and dozens of his beloved askaris at one time and another.

"No, old Scrub was off on his own, to get between the raiders and their base over the border. Quite a big safari he'd got, and every man of them an old K.A.R. askari. And

with personal scores to settle with the raiders, too."

"Scrub's private war, eh?" smiled Major Fortescue.

"Just that."

"And you chipped in?"

"Oh, I joined up with old Scrub, for any fun that might be going . . . By Jove, the old lad was a great bush-whacker."

"Yes," agreed Major Fortescue. "There isn't much he didn't know about native warfare."

"Did you get in the way of the raiders?"

"Rather, somewhat. Old Scrub laid a lovely ambush. Got 'em on toast. Looked as though we might get a surfeit of Arab on toast, at one time."

"How did he know which way they'd return from the raid?" enquired the doctor. "I suppose there were hundreds of miles of border where they . . ."

"Water," was the reply. "Got to steer by the water-holes in desert country, John. Scrub knew one they'd simply have to come to."

"Well, then, it seems to me they'd simply have to defeat you and drive you from the water, or die of thirst," observed John Desart.

"Just Scrub's point," replied Colonel Mortimer. "He knew they'd got to come there, and he knew they'd got to fight—and that was all he wanted."

"Well, well, tell us all about it," begged John Desart.

"Oh, we got there in time, and dossed down, and along they came, and barged into us."

"Yes, well?"

"We scrapped."

"Oh Lord! Be not like dumb driven cattle . . . Have a heart man, and tell a tale."

"Well, what d'you want to know?" enquired Colonel Mortimer, glancing meaningly at the Reverend Clarence Coxe, who sat twitching, fidgeting, and biting his nails nervously.

Clarence Coxe must not hear the tale that poor Scrub Tattinger had told ere he died.

"Everything. What time of day was it?"

"Peaceful eventide."

"What did they do when you opened fire?"

"Those who were hit fell down."

"And the rest?"

"Fell down even quicker."

"And then?"

"Spread out and crawled all round us in a circle."

"You were outnumbered, then?"

"About twenty to one."

"And then?"

"Rushed us at dawn."

"What with?"

"Swords and spears, after quite a good little barrage of rifle-fire."

" Real hand-to-hand fighting, then ? "

" Not very much. Scrub's men could shoot to hit. And I'd got some quite useful lads ; and Scrub and I got off quite a number of rounds. And we didn't miss much."

" Did you actually fight anyone hand to hand yourself ? " enquired John Desart.

" Oh, I don't know. I gave one lad a tap."

" Tell us."

" Oh, he was a priceless old bean, about six foot six, black as ebony, strong as Samson, and active as a cat . . . By Jove, he was a brave lad, too. All over the shop. What the best journalists call ' bore a charmed life,' too. O.C. storm-troops. After sprinting all round the ring, giving directions and heartening up his braves—not that they wanted it—he got off ten rounds from a damn great elephant-gun, and at the tenth, the whole congregation arose to its feet and we were for it."

" Rushed you, eh ? "

" Somewhat."

" And this big black chap came for you, eh ? "

" As it happened. I was just shooting frequent and free as well as looking all ways at once, as our little circle closed in, and suddenly this old lad was right on top of me as we all sprang to our feet to repel boarders . . . He'd got a thundering great curved sword, almost like the blade of a sickle set in a sword-handle,

both edges sharp. As he landed off a rock in front of me he nearly reaped my head with his blooming sickle—horizontal cut, regular whistler. I ducked under it, and bayoneted him with my short rifle."

"What, had you a bayonet fixed?" asked the doctor.

"No, bayoneted him with a rifle, I said. Awful prod below the breast-bone, and as he doubled up I changed hands quick, slung the rifle up and conked him on the noddle . . . poor old lad . . . Hit him too hard, and he died. Brought the sword home with me as a souvenir of a good chap of whom I should have liked to see more . . . He ought to have been in the K.A.R. . . . Yes, it's a fine sword. They use them for hamstringing elephants. Do it on foot too. Curious weapon. No guard nor cross-piece. Just a small ebony handle . . . Yes—he died . . ."

"And then?" urged Major Fortescue.

"They wilted—what with our heavy steady fire, and seeing their C.-in-C. go down—drew off and stuck to the small-arm business for the rest of the day."

"All day?"

"Yes. They had to get to the water, you see."

"And that night?"

"Didn't do much. A bit weary, and their

poor tongues hanging out. And when the sun rose upon the stricken field, lo, the two columns, of the K.A.R. were in position, having converged upon them with beautiful accuracy and timing."

"And then?"

"They got it in the neck."

"Old Scrub was a happy man that night, I'll bet," observed Major Fortescue.

"Well, that's just what he wasn't," said Colonel Mortimer. "What I was telling you, Tub," and again he eyed the Reverend Clarence Coxe with a look devoid of love or even esteem.

"He'd stopped a nasty one. Soft lead slug —in the left shoulder joint . . . And he had this awful trouble on his mind . . ."

"Yes, of course . . . sorry. The flow of your blooming eloquence had put Scrub's story clean out of my mind. Now tell us about that," requested Major Fortescue.

"Do," agreed John Desart. "And for once in your life, tell a tale properly."

"No, poor old Scrub's only happiness, once the fight was over, was because he knew he was going to die. I think perhaps he was happier than he'd been any night since I joined up with him . . . But he certainly wasn't *happy* . . . You remember what an awfully conscientious old bird he was at school, and how he used to take things to heart. Well, he hadn't

changed a bit. Had the same old bouts of conscience and belly-ache. Cause and effect. I suppose, but I don't know which comes first —which is the *fons et origo mali*."

"Most dyspeptics are conscientious," smiled the doctor.

"And most conscientious people are dyspeptic," observed Major Fortescue. "I am, myself. Sorry, Milly. Long John's fault."

"Well, that day I told you about, when I ran into Scrub, I saw that he'd got something pretty heavy on his mind. That down-in-the-mouth look he used to have, as a Prefect, at school, if he'd thought he'd given a juvenile criminal one too many, or beat him too hard . . . Only he'd got it really bad . . . Looked simply awful.

"'What's up, Tat?' I said, when the camp had settled down for the night and we were having a pipe by the fire, that first night.

"'Murder,' says he, in a deep sepulchral voice, and groans."

At the word '*murder*,' the Reverend Clarence Coxe sprang to his feet as though he had been stung, and his three friends, all looking uncomfortable, if not indeed somewhat guilty, avoided his eye.

"'Well, they won't get you here, old son,' I said," continued Colonel Mortimer as though nothing had happened. "'And the K.A.R.

will neither arrest you, nor let you be arrested. So cheer up.'

" ' I'm not liable to arrest,' says Scrub. ' I wish I were. I wish I could be . . .' "

Colonel Mortimer, catching the doctor's eye, stopped in time to leave the words " tried and hanged " unuttered.

(Would Coxe never go?) . . . " ' If I didn't consider it a wrong and indecent thing to do, I'd shoot myself,' " Scrub continued.

" ' Tell us, Scrub,' I said. ' Just in case I can be of any help.'

" He didn't tell me that night. Said he must think it over, some more . . . But he told me after the fight with the raiders. As I said, he knew he was dying, poor old chap . . ."

Colonel Mortimer fell silent, looked from the Doctor to Major Fortescue and glanced meaningly at the Reverend Clarence Coxe, who stood listening.

" Aren't you going for your usual morning walk, Coxe? " asked Major Fortescue.

" Yes," was the reply. " Time for my constitutional. Late, in fact. You've kept me here when I ought to have been taking the air, Milly," and the speaker giggled.

" Well, for God's sake take it now," begged Major Fortescue.

And, smiling wretchedly, the Reverend Clarence Coxe bade them be good boys and

went away, followed by the gaze of three pairs of eyes whose glance bore no sign of affection, though much of pity and regret.

"*Now*, Milly, let's have it. What's this about poor dear old Scrub's death and the awful happening?" said John Desart, as with a sigh of relief, the three friends turned to each other again.

THE INNER BOOK

PART I

INTRODUCING COXE AND ALSO THE BOX

"Chi va piano va sano e va lontano."

PART I

ALGERNON DASHWOOD COXE threw himself down on the large deep-cushioned settee in the sitting-room of Giovanna Blayton's flat, and shudderingly contemplated the box again, with unabated amazement and increasing horror. Also with a kind of protesting incredulity.

For, as he was reluctantly compelled to realize, it was the box of his dreadful dreams.

It was an Italian steel trunk, rather large, very strong indeed, and self-locking. Its two locks clicked and fastened themselves when the lid was closed. To open it, two different keys were required, though none was needed to fasten it.

No, there was no possible shadow of doubt. It was The Box. It was undeniably, though unbelievably, the authentic and identical box of his nightmares, those unspeakable agonies of mental torture that had so often caused him to keep himself awake, night after night, through very fear of sleep.

Algernon Dashwood Coxe, gazing at it with

the uttermost repugnance and aversion, told himself that it was all that he was not.

For there was nothing Italianate, steely, large, or very strong, about Algernon, a pleasant-featured kindly-looking man with a clean-shaven whimsical mouth; large clear well-opened eyes of the kind termed dreamy, suggestive rather of thought than of action; a small delicately-formed nose; an even more delicate complexion; and a long and somewhat pointed chin.

Nor, indeed, did Algernon give the impression of being self-locking, or that two keys would be needed to open him.

Certainly Giovanna Blayton had never regarded him as having a locked mind.

On the contrary, she had considered him to be an extremely simple person, rather weak—indeed, where his mother was concerned, incredibly weak—kind, gentle, clever, honourable, utterly dear and unutterably lovable.

And here, in Giovanna's flat, sat Algernon Coxe, plunged in the depths of despair, his usually pleasant and kindly face a mask of misery and remorse, as he stared fascinated at the box.

Gazing until his eyes ached and the box seemed to dilate and contract, he realized that

he must never see the thing again, and simultaneously knew that he must never let it out of his sight.

Out of his sight?

No, that was an exaggeration. He should have said out of his possession, out of his charge. He could place it in absolute safety under his hand, as it were, though not under his eye, and never see it again.

What to do with it? He must put it where he could feel that it was safe—absolutely safe.

And the best place would be in his own house. Only there would it be under his hand and yet not beneath his eye.

Yes. Somewhere in his own house. And in a room in which it would be not only safe, not only out of his sight, but where it would never be seen by anyone else.

The tank-room, of course.

That dark windowless room, right at the top of the house, which was half-filled by the great cistern, and in which was nothing else but a few derelict trunks, portmanteaux and anonymous rubbish.

Of course! Two or three old trunks. The box could stand up there in the darkest corner, with a trunk in front of it, another beside it, and one on top of it. He would lock the room and hide the key.

Safe, secret, forgotten. Yes, in course of time, forgotten surely.

Absolutely safe, for no one would ever enter the locked tank-room. Who should ever have any occasion to enter it? And even if they found the key and did so, what would they see by candle-light?

Two or three old trunks.

Of course, no one either would or could go into the tank-room.

Plumbers, if anything went wrong with the cistern, owing to burst water-pipes or other domestic catastrophe?

Well, he could go up with them and remain while they worked. He could keep his back to the corner in which lurked the box, and forget that it was there . . . forget what was in it.

There it would be absolutely safe.

Giovanna . . . Giovanna . . . Giovanna.

Algernon Coxe rose from the settee and, carefully avoiding the box, strode up and down the room, his pleasant and kindly face distorted, agonized, suggestive of that of a child about to cry.

Giovanna.

Oh God, how could he have done it?

Giovanna.

That vivid flower; that bright flame; that lovely thing, compact of colour, glow and glamour.

Giovanna.

Lying beside him on sun-kissed golden sands all a summer day.

Walking with him by enchanted seas . . . Dancing, light-prisoned in his arms, to elfin music . . . Sitting beside him by fire-light on that—oh, Heaven—on that very settee.

And Algernon Coxe flung himself down on it, buried his face in it and wept.

For a time he lay thus, his body occasionally seized by a fit of trembling, occasionally shaken by an unconquerable emotion.

Suddenly he sprang to his feet, and stood listening.

Yes, someone was knocking at the front door of the flat. Should he answer the knock?

No. Let them hammer the door down. Yes, but suppose they did hammer the door down?

Another knock . . .

Oh, this was dreadful. They were knocking on his brain. He could bear it no longer.

As he crossed the room, Algernon Coxe wiped his eyes, ran his hands over his ruffled hair, pulled down his waistcoat, buttoned his coat, and endeavoured to compose his features.

The front door, immediately opposite that of the sitting-room, opened into a tiny hall. Standing in this he could see, vaguely outlined

through the semi-opaque glass, the figure of a woman.

Who could she be? What could she want?

With a great effort of will, he forced himself to open the door and to appear normal.

"Oh, is Miss Blayton in, please?" said the woman.

Algernon Coxe stared at her.

A tall good-looking girl . . . Pity she dyed her hair . . . The moment one interfered with Nature's own colour-scheme one got a wrong effect . . . Nature's own tint was the only one that harmonized with the rest of the colouring . . . Not being Nature's, it obviously wasn't natural, and therefore didn't look natural . . . Giovanna would never dye her hair.

"Is Miss Blayton at home, please?" the girl repeated.

Rather a metallic voice . . . A pity people, especially women, did not understand the enormous importance of the voice. Nothing so revealing as the voice . . . Nothing so potent to affect the impression first produced . . . Giovanna's voice had been pure music.

"*Would* you kindly tell me whether Miss Blayton is at home, please?"

Algernon Coxe pulled himself together.

"Eh? Oh, yes, I beg your pardon. Giovanna is not here. No, she—er—has gone away—gone on a long journey."

"*Reely!*" said the girl. "That's strange! It was only two or three days ago that I saw her at the *Hors Concours*—the *Green Haddock*, you know—and she certainly said nothing about it to *me*."

"Well, she's gone," replied Algernon Coxe, and was aware that across his shoulder, the girl's eyes rested on the box.

"Where to?" asked the girl.

"I'm afraid I can't tell you," replied Algernon Coxe.

Still, eyeing the box, she observed, rather to herself than to him, as though musing aloud,

"H'm. You can't tell me? That might, or might not, be because you don't know."

Why did the girl wear a necklace of pearls which obviously had cost either five thousand pounds or five shillings? Giovanna never wore false pearls.

Why on earth did this quite pretty girl make that hideous scarlet mess beneath her nose. No human lips were ever that shape or that colour.

Fancy kissing that daub of paint. Revolting.

And probably she had a nice enough mouth of her own. Not to be compared with Giovanna's, of course.

"Eh? I beg your pardon. I'm afraid I wasn't . . ."

Good Heavens. The girl had turned on her heel and flounced off.

What had she been saying?

Closing the front door of the flat, Algernon Coxe returned to the sitting-room, shut the door behind him, and again flung himself down upon the settee.

Unconsciously, and following a bachelor habit, he put his feet up, and hastily, almost guiltily, put them down again when he realized he had put them on the box.

From the side-pocket of his coat he took his cigarette-case, opened it, saw, as he was about to take a cigarette, the photograph of Giovanna, hastily shut the case and returned it to his pocket.

She had given him that case at Polporth Cove in Cornwall. It was her first gift to him. She had taught him to smoke.

Polporth Cove . . .

Giovanna . . .

It had been on the very first day of his holiday in Cornwall that he had met Giovanna.

What a perfect morning, and what a perfect spot it had been.

Fit setting for what was to follow.

Glorious sunshine; a gentle breeze that brought the indescribable clean odours of sun-warmed seaweed; high cliffs surrounding the perfect tiny bay; great boulders studding a

beach; immaculate yellow sand, which, twice each day, the maternal sea lovingly washed and adorned with shells and long ribbons of brightest green.

He had undressed behind a rock, put on his new bathing-suit and stepped forth to . . .

To encounter a mermaid?

Was it a mermaid?

No mermaid ever ran skipping to the sea in a scarlet bathing-suit, with a gay handkerchief round her head.

Nor did mermaids cry:

"Hullo, Merman! Come on!"

Nor did you seize their hands, run laughing into the water, and together plunge and swim.

A few minutes later, Algernon Dashwood Coxe and Giovanna Blayton were sitting on a ledge of rock, their feet dangling in the water, the sun warming their bodies, the glorious air exhilarating them; and each discovering the other.

"Down here for long?" asked Algernon Coxe.

"Live here," replied Giovanna, "except in winter. Daddy paints and I try to. He's James Augustus Blayton."

Algernon Coxe went through the motions of raising a non-existent hat and bowing low.

"By Jove," he said. "What a day!" and became subtle. "Does he bite much? I mean, do you think it would be possible for one to

meet him? I mean, do you think you could present me to him?"

"Be easier if I knew your name," laughed the girl.

"Coxe. Algernon Dashwood Coxe. What's yours?"

"Same as Daddy's," the girl assured him.

"Then may I call you James Augustus?"

"I prefer Jo."

"Short for Joseph?" he asked.

"No, for Giovanna Giulia Francesca Bianca Orsola."

"Italian! . . . Wise to shorten it, I think. But I shall call you Giovanna. Jo isn't worthy. Giovanna is like you."

"How?"

"Absolutely lovely. Beautiful. Perfect."

"Tut. And again tut . . . How bold and bad is the Merman. You'll be a Forsaken Merman in a minute . . ."

"*Giovanna*," he murmured.

"Oh, *Al*gernon *Dash*wood," she giggled, and then announced that she should call him Jimmy.

"Why?" he asked.

"Oh, Algernon Dashwood is too worthy," she replied. "Have you a fag in your pocket?"

"I haven't even a pocket, Giovanna. And what is a fag?"

"I have heard them called cigarettes by the

precious," admitted Giovanna. "Are there any pockets in your clothes up there?"

"Lots."

"Cigarettes?"

"Alas! I don't smoke."

"Turn your face full toward me, Jimmy dear . . . In case I never see it again."

"You're going to see it again, all right, Giovanna."

"'Twill always interest me, James. That of a man who does not smoke! . . . Where did you contract the ghastly non-smoking vice?"

"Well, you see, my father doesn't, and of course my mother . . ."

"Hereditary, eh? Worst form of it, as no one knows better than I. Mother taught me to smoke . . . Heredity! . . . I inherited a terrible temper from Mother and a much worse one from Daddy. Sicilian temperament from one and artistic temperament from the other."

Algernon Coxe laughed.

"Sounds beautiful. Romantic . . . Black Hands . . . Camorra . . . Vendetta . . . Corsican Brothers . . ."

"It is comparatively rare for Sicilian girls to have Corsican brothers," murmured Giovanna. "I have none. Nor have I black hands."

"Brigands . . . Blood feuds . . . Vengeance . . . By Jove, you'd be a dangerous girl to

offend! And anything you did, you'd do thoroughly. Are you very vengeful?"

"*Rather!* I should think so! Only yesterday I was annoyed, injured, insulted. I felt absolutely stung. But I had my revenge. I simply killed him. A wasp . . . Come on, let's swim. I'm tired of talking about me."

. . . . . .

Algernon Coxe sprang to his feet, almost stumbling against the box. The telephone bell had brought him back to the present and to misery.

"Hullo!"

"Wracket, the butcher, speaking. For orders."

"For Miss Blayton? She's gone away."

"For long?"

"Yes, a long while."

"No use our ringing up for a week or two then."

"No. Nor for a month or two either . . ."

Algernon Coxe closed the conversation by hanging up the receiver.

Butcher!

He prowled aimlessly about the room, picking up and replacing small objects without seeing them.

He found himself staring at an enlarged snapshot of Giovanna and her father.

He had taken that photograph himself in the garden of Blayton's summer cottage at Polporth.

A bad man, Blayton, and over-prone to indulge and excuse, in the name of the Artistic Temperament, immorality, gross selfishness, drunkenness, laziness, and a sulky moodiness varied by spasms of uncontrolled temper.

There had been merry times in that household when "Mrs. Blayton" was alive!

Giulia Carlotta Bellinzoni *alias* Mrs. Blayton. Judging by his dozens of pictures of her, and also by Giovanna herself, she must have been a most lovely woman, or fiend.

Apparently she had been an unspoilt and untutored Sicilian peasant-girl when he first saw her and painted her in Italy among the alien vines.

Why couldn't the beast have left it at that, or left her alone?

He could hear Blayton's voice now.

"Gad! She was a lovely creature. Absolutely primitive. Pure Moorish, I should think. Proud as Lucifer. Uncivilized. Uneducated. Unspoilt. Absolute Nature. But I introduced her to Art.

"Had to make love to her though, before I could paint her as I wanted her. My word, I set a match to a powder-magazine when I did that. And it wasn't I who had to do the love-making then, by Jove!

"She was the perfect model! But of course you've seen her on canvas a score of times.

But it wasn't only the face and figure. It was the fire. Mind you, I don't mind admitting that my *Sappho* is one of the great pictures of the world—and undoubtedly the greatest *Sappho*—because Giulia was my model. She *was* Sappho . . ."

And then the insufferable fellow would drain his glass, leer, and misquote:

> "'Oh Isles of Greece, oh Isles of Greece,
> Where burning Sappho sighed and sung.'

"Yes, I've been a lucky man, if there be such a thing as luck. Anyhow, the greatest painter of hot sun on honey sands by the wine-dark sea, the crumbling cliff, the cave, the grot, the very haunts of Sappho's self—met Sappho's own self and made her his model!

"Gad, those Sicilian days and nights! I took her to Taormina and painted her on the sands; in the sea; among the Greek and Roman ruins; on the cliff; everywhere. How she enriched my life, and how rich she made me . . .

"Then I took her to Naples and painted her in Pompeii as Aphrodite revisiting her ruined temple.

"But you know the picture, of course. America has it now . . . I must do another Aphrodite rising from the foam one of these days. I might do it down here . . . I would, if I still

had Giulia . . . Must wait till Giovanna's a bit plumper . . .

"Gad, how those swine at Naples tried to get Giulia away from me . . . But not she! . . Some of them would have given her anything, but James Augustus Blayton had got her for nothing. She worshipped the ground I trod on. And she'd hold a pose until she fainted . . .

"I had her taught to read and write English, and she was quite useful looking after my accounts and things . . . Clever girl . . . Very useful. Hell of a temper though.

"And *love!* By Gad, she could love . . . Used to say, 'My lof for you—it is my life for me, yes,' and things like that. Used to make me laugh. Bit of a nuisance sometimes.

"Well! Poor Giulia! A shocking loss . . ."

Algernon Coxe had not cared to probe what might be an unhealed wound, nor to risk stirring poignant memories by asking Blayton how this irreparable loss had occurred. There had been no need.

"And simply never looked at another man," his host had continued. "No other man existed. I was her god, her idol, rather than her protector, her employer. And she—well—er, oh lovely, lovely, and as I say, the perfect model.

"A glorious, lithe, fierce panther of a girl,

graceful, sinuous and strong in mind, body and soul—and a panther without a claw or a snarl, as far as *I* was concerned, though, as I say, she had the very devil's own temper.

"But, you know, the very cleverest of us don't know all there is to know about women.

"The lovely panther ceased to purr, and she produced the snarls and claws, all right, one day when I told her I didn't think I should paint her any more, or want her any longer.

"Some of the more jealous critics were beginning to hint that they and the public were getting a bit tired of James Augustus Blayton's eternal model as Sappho, Jael, Esther, Salome, Venus, The Gipsy, The Slave Girl, and so on.

"Gad, I shan't forget that morning. I'd just finished that glorious picture of her as Cleopatra; and when she really grasped that I was tired of her, both as a model and as a woman, she seized a palette-knife and tried to stab herself. Being rather annoyed, and thinking it was all bluff and bunkum, I just roared with laughter.

"It wasn't bluff though, b'gad. For after jabbing herself with the blunt palette-knife, she dashed off into the kitchen, just as she was.

"I called out to her to put her hat on, for modesty's sake, and cleaned my brushes.

"By and by, when I went into the kitchen, fully prepared to forgive her and tell her that,

of course, I intended to do the handsome thing by her and the child, there she was with the carving-knife well shoved into her neck.

"Nice thing for me! Just think of it.

"I couldn't tell you what it cost me, one way and another, to prevent a scandal. She was game though, I will say . . . She told the doctor, an old friend of both of us—brought Giovanna into the world—that it was an accident . . . caught her foot and fell with the knife in her hand.

"Obvious lie.

"Everything possible was done for her, of course, and for a time it looked as though she'd pull through, but she developed pneumonia. Just didn't want to live, either. Luckily, Giovanna was at school, and I kept her there until she was old enough to be a companion to me . . .

"No . . . Poor Giovanna never had much of a mother, nor a mother's care and good influence . . . All she got from her was a devil of a temper and a queer box, an Italian contraption that Giulia set great store by. Said to have been specially made for a famous Sicilian brigand—a relation of hers . . . Lover, I dare say . . . I dunno . . . Always remained a regular peasant at heart, and kept her money and jewellery in the thing. Wouldn't trust any Bank, and actually made a will—

leaving the box to Giovanna—on a leaf of the exercise-book in which she kept a record of the times I kissed her! Fact, she did!

"'James kissed me so kindly last night,' sort of thing.

"Rummy woman . . . Would have faded early, though, and she was getting very boring . . ."

Yes, a nice man, Mr. James Augustus Blayton.

Poor little Giovanna! No wonder she had a queer temper and some queer ways.

What should she be but unbalanced and abnormal, this daughter of a primitive Sicilian peasant and such a man as Blayton, the artist?

What should she be but most utterly desirable, and lovable . . . most utterly detestable and hateful?

Hateful? Detestable?

Had he ever thought so before his mother had opened his eyes—had shown him how utterly hopelessly impossible was Giovanna?

Giovanna as wife of Algernon Dashwood Coxe!

It seemed that till then he had been able only to see her virtues. His mother was able only to see her vices.

Vices? Were cigarette-smoking, cocktail-drinking, card-playing for money, dancing at night-clubs, going to race-meetings, and such

amusements of the modern girl, to be called *vices*?

Certainly it had given him just a faint sense of—not shock, not disillusionment—say surprise, incongruity, that first evening when he heard her say:

"Chuck me a fag, Daddy," saw her "field" it and light it from her pocket-lighter almost in one movement, and sit deeply inhaling tobacco-smoke with the greatest satisfaction and contentment.

He had hated to see the beastly smoke come curling like wraiths of poisonous serpents from her dainty nostrils; and when she lit cigarette after cigarette, each from the glowing stump of the last, he—well, he was sorry.

It seemed a desecration, a profanation.

Fancy the stench of nicotine from such a perfect mouth as that. Fancy love's first kiss tainted with that reek. And he noticed that the long and lovely fingers of that beautiful hand were yellow-stained.

But all that was forgotten, next morning, in the sheer distilled purity of the air and sunshine and sea, as they swam and rested and dived, and sat upon the warm sands.

The thought of that loveliness, which was but the setting for the jewel of Giovanna's own greater loveliness, made one's heart ache.

How nearly he had kissed her that second

morning as she mocked and teased him, and then put her hand in his.

Lovable?

Had any man loved any woman as he had loved Giovanna in those new-washed mornings of his new-found world?

And the day when he did kiss her, and, unbelievably, found his kiss returned, his embrace answered with an embrace as ardent as his own!

No, he must not think of that morning now. Better think of the evening and the hatefulness of James Augustus Blayton, who gave him the choice between a quarrel and a cocktail.

The man's contemptuous stare and insolent guffaw when he, Algernon Coxe, had simply and candidly told him that he had never tasted alcohol in his life.

"Good Gad! What do you drink then? *Milk*? What, aren't you *weaned* yet? Well . . . If you've never tasted alcohol yet, it's about time you did. For I can tell you one thing—no puling teetotaller is going to be the son-in-law of James Augustus Blayton . . . Are you a squittering vegetarian too?"

And Giovanna had laughed, in apparent sympathy and agreement with her father's point of view.

He had managed to swallow the beastly cocktail that Giovanna brought to him, bidding

him drink to Happy Days, the brief toast unenthusiastically proposed by Blayton.

Yes, he had drunk one cocktail, and Giovanna had drunk three, and whether it was he or she who had been thereafter slightly intoxicated, he did not know.

What he did know, was that the evening was a disappointment, to say the least of it, and that he had almost hated the look of critical appraisement with which Giovanna had eyed him when he had absolutely, flatly, and finally, refused to drink wine, whisky or any other form of alcohol, at dinner.

What he had hated without qualification or any shadow of doubt, was Blayton's attitude.

"Do you propose to purchase your young man a piece of blue ribbon, or to teach him to take his liquor like a gentleman, Giovanna? . . . Or are you going to join the rot-gut swipes brigade yourself? . . . Believe me, my lad, the sooner you learn to smoke and drink like any other normal person, the sooner you'll have a chance of domestic peace. Domestic life's difficult enough, let me tell you, when there's a certain amount of compatibility of taste and temperament—but in a case like this . . !" and so forth.

Giovanna had laughed, patted his shoulder, said:

"You mustn't take any notice of Daddy, dear," and, turning to her father, had added:

"Don't you worry. I'm going to take Jimmy in hand forthwith. His education is about to begin!"

No, of course, cocktail-drinking is not a vice. But three before her dinner, and then wine with dinner—a young girl . . .!

Nor is card-playing a vice, but did not the tiniest of clouds arise, a cloud no bigger than a man's hand, on that perfect morning of sun and sea, when, in reply to his loving question as to whether she were worried about anything, she had laughingly murmured something about having dropped more than she could afford, at poker, with some of Daddy's friends in Town.

"I'm afraid I haven't a poker face," she had laughed, and he had replied that he could bear that, in view of the fact that she had the very loveliest face that God had ever made to the better adorning and brightening of this world.

Nevertheless, he had experienced again that feeling of—not disillusion, not disappointment—perhaps discomfort, as he, probably quite erroneously, visualized heavy-jowled, sensual-faced men round a green table, in a stifling room that stank of assorted alcohol and tobacco-smoke.

As he thought of the cigarette chain-smoking,

of the cocktails, and of certain words and expressions that Giovanna had learned from her father and his friends, the cloud had spread and a chill had endeavoured to invade the happy warmth of Algernon's heart.

And then that other utterly beastly Cornish evening which he was practically accused of spoiling, when, after dinner, it was discovered not only that they could not make a four, but that thanks to his unbelievable ignorance of all card games, the party could not play cards at all.

At first they had affected to disbelieve him, had bade him come off it and cease pulling their legs. As soon as it dawned upon them that he was speaking the truth, they had become frankly insulting.

When, with one accord, they stared half-pityingly, half-accusingly, at Giovanna, she had frowned, smiled a little wryly, and remarked:

"Oh, well, it can't be helped! . . . We'll play roulette."

And when he had refused to play roulette for money, and she, shrugging her shoulders, had joined in the game—had the rift then appeared within the lute, the rift into which his mother had driven the shattering wedge?

But what, in God's name, after all, were these wretched trifles—a wisp of smoke; the composition and flavour of a beverage; a method of passing an idle hour; a form of words—that

they should sunder and break the hearts of a man and a woman?

Had he not so loved her that he loved the world and every man and woman in it, and God who made it?

And had not she—Heaven knew why—loved him as deeply and truly as he loved her?

Had she not, after crushing her lips to his, straining his body to hers, sworn that she would die if he ceased to love her?

Did she not refuse to say that she loved him because "love" was but a feeble and inadequate word for the worship, adoration, idolatry, the scorching passionate devotion, that filled her mind, body and soul, her days and nights, her life now and hereafter?

And yet, in spite of his love for her, her burning adoration of him, what else had they in common? Where would you find two people less suited than he and she for life together? . . . Their outlook on life, their tastes, standards, upbringing, heredity, environment.

Her home and his.

James Augustus Blayton and the Reverend Clarence Dashwood Coxe; and, Heaven above, her mother and *his*.

Yes, Miss Giulia Bellinzoni the artist's model and Mrs. Minerva Dashwood-Coxe of Melfont Parva Vicarage!

Incompatibility of temperament; utter unsuitability. Yes, but if Giovanna were incompatible and unsuitable for him, he was naturally and obviously as incompatible and unsuitable for Giovanna. God only knew what his attraction for her had ever been.

She had said it was his "differentness," his utter unlikeness to Boris Goudroff and the rest, the men, her father's friends, among whom she had grown up.

She had called him clean, straight, simple, dependable.

It had struck him as being really humorous—most painfully humorous—that anybody should call him, of all people, "dependable." It was just the very last thing in all the world that he was. Undeniably he was different from her other friends and, without being either a prig, a hypocrite, or a Pharisee, he could be quite content to remain different.

And yet it was this very "differentness" that had wrecked the barque of their happiness.

Could not he have made an attempt to become, outwardly at any rate, more like these people? Less rigid; less narrow; less—what? Let him be honest and say it—less everything that his parental training had made him.

Could not he have *made* himself a suitable mate for Giovanna? Was there, after all, any

absolutely insurmountable obstacle in the path to their happiness?

There was. His mother.

Was there any real reason and cause why their wonderful love should have been poisoned and turned to hate?

His mother's interference.

§ 2

As long as he lived, he would never forget Giovanna's one and only visit to the Vicarage.

What a contrast between the two women, between her whom he worshipped and her whom he obeyed!

His mother, tall, stately, cool, the embodiment of British matronhood; a woman of great character; quiet, resolute, irresistible; a woman who throughout her life had never failed of her purpose; a woman who had had her way.

And what a way! Sane, sober, serious. The way of the true Christian woman ruling a Christian household—and parish—with dignity, power and strength.

Narrow and conventional?

Of course not, unless one would call a grand deep river conventional because, unlike the restless ever-rolling sea, it had banks and bonds and a fixed immutable course.

A great woman; a good woman; a wonderful mother who had taught him, watched him,

and ruled him, from his birth; whom he had honoured, obeyed and *feared* from his birth.

And poor little Giovanna.

How the tiny child had seemed to shrink, to shrivel, overawed and overwhelmed by the mere majesty of his mother's presence.

Of course, it was but her nervous consciousness of this that had made her even more flippant than usual; had made her flippancy almost impudence and insolence—in his mother's eyes, at least.

How bewilderingly his fairy had become an imp; his lovely and original child had become a precocious brat; his "not impossible she" had become his mother's perfectly impossible daughter-in-law elect.

Why was it that Giovanna, the child of Nature by the sea in Cornwall, became a totally different Giovanna, only too evidently the child of James Augustus Blayton and Giulia Bellinzoni, by the side of his mother in Melfont Parva Vicarage?

Giovanna had seemed bent on making the very worst of herself, and certainly his mother had seemed bent on bringing out the worst that was in her.

When he had ventured afterwards to point this out to his mother, she had, with perfect truth, remarked that one could only bring out what was there.

Things had gone wrong from the first, beginning with his mother's long and searching look at Giovanna, which later the girl had referred to as a rude stare; and continuing with his mother's very naturally interested questioning, which Giovanna chose to consider an unwarrantable inquisition, and had answered accordingly.

For example, what on earth possessed Giovanna to reply:

"I was present at the wedding, but I really forget the name of the place," when Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, in the course of conversation concerning a visit she had once paid to Sicily, enquired:

"I wonder whether your father and mother were married in that wonderful church at Monreale above Palermo? . . ."

That dreadful reply was really absolutely rude, and in the very worst taste, as well as being quite untrue, since, unfortunately, her father and mother had never been married at all.

And couldn't Giovanna have refrained from smoking, just for one week-end, instead of giving his mother cause to observe, with marked absence of criticism.

"Do you know, Miss Blayton, this is the very first time I have smelt tobacco-smoke in this drawing-room since I first entered the house, over twenty years ago."

"Do you dislike the smell?" asked Giovanna kindly.

"I loathe it," was the reply.

"All a matter of taste," observed Giovanna lightly. "I'll tell you a smell I simply can't bear—that of a drawing-room that opens on to a damp and mouldy conservatory . . . Like a vault." And Giovanna artlessly eyed the door of the damp and mouldy conservatory on to which the drawing-room opened.

And again, when, at dinner, with a generous gesture in the direction of the jug of barley-water and the syphon of lemonade, the Reverend Clarence Coxe asked her what she would drink, need she have replied:

"May I have a whisky and soda, please?" and caused his mother to express regret at her unpreparedness, and to hope that Miss Blayton could manage without stimulants just for once.

His father, gazing at his plate, had maintained an eloquent silence.

Had his mother calmly and deliberately dissected Giovanna and laid her dismembered personality bare and quivering before him and his father?

Or had Giovanna deliberately, as he said, made the worst of herself?

Certainly she had made no effort to create a good impression.

Nor had his mother had it all her own way in the matter of unspoken criticism and unuttered comment.

What, for example, had Giovanna meant when she had asked with apparent innocence:

"Do you open many bazaars, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe?"

Undoubtedly his mother had found more in the question than he himself had done, for she had afterwards alluded to it as a studied insult. When, with the intention of defending and exculpating the girl, he had asked Giovanna if she meant more than she said, and if so, what it was, Giovanna had smiled subtly, and replied:

"Dear Mamma opens a bazaar with massive and impressive dignity, every time she pours out tea . . . or sits down to table . . . or says 'How d'you do!' . . . When dear Mamma comes into the room one looks for the rest of the procession—and then one realizes that she is the procession, and the bazaar is now open."

Hurt and bewildered, he had asked Giovanna if she wished to insult his mother, and Giovanna, smiling her most Italian smile, had replied:

"No more than she wishes to insult me, Jimmy. Why should I, you funny boy?"

. . . . . .

Algernon Coxe dreamed on: delved deeper and deeper into the past . . .

Could even the dullest masculine perception

have failed to see that, in the drawing-room, after that painful dinner, the ladies were not peacefully enjoying the society each of the other ?

With the utmost good breeding Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was now definitely probing into Giovanna's past, and Giovanna was answering her questions not only truthfully, but with truth adorned.

Fidgeting in his chair, while his silent father endlessly examined the toe of the boot of the crossed leg which he rhythmically swung up and down, he heard the question and answer which alternately angered him with each of the women whom he loved.

What possessed Giovanna to draw so sordid a picture of her past and present life, and so to stress the unorthodoxy and Bohemianism of her upbringing ?

Only once had his father raised his eyes from that maddening swinging foot, to look him in the face, and that was when Giovanna confessed—nay boasted—that she had frequently sat for one or two of her father's more impecunious artist friends, notably as *The Syren of the Rocks*, in the picture of that name hung in the Royal Academy.

The Reverend Clarence Dashwood Coxe and Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had seen that picture—before they had had time to look away.

The painful silence that followed the

announcement was broken by the voice of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, a voice growing more and more hollow as the evening dragged out its interminable length.

"And who introduced my son to you, Miss Blayton?"

"Oh, we introduced ourselves—undressing on the beach at Polporth Cove—you know how one picks up a . . ."

A sinister sound interrupted the speaker. It was as though the Reverend Clarence had, by spontaneous combustion, exploded.

He rose from his chair, glanced at Giovanna, and, without a word, departed thence.

§ 3

That night, Algernon and Giovanna had had their first quarrel.

Miserably he had said good-night to his mother and Giovanna, and the gaze of his mother, as she coldly kissed his brow, had been one of pity mingled with reproach.

As he stood, pyjama-clad, gazing blankly at his reflection in the mirror, there had come a tapping, a gentle rapping, at his door. And to his surprise, Giovanna had entered. Giovanna, clad in a dressing-gown, of a type quite different from that worn by his mother.

Staring dumbly at this apparition, he heard it say:

"Jimmy dear, I want to go home after breakfast to-morrow, if I can't go before."

"What do you mean?"

"Well, what I really mean by those words, Jimmy, is that I want to go home after breakfast to-morrow, if I cannot go before."

"What do you suppose my mother will say?"

"That, dear Jimmy, I cannot tell you. But I know what she will think . . . And she'll open a bazaar, Jimmy. *Not* in aid of a fallen woman . . . She'll call a meeting, Jimmy. You'll be the meeting. And she'll take the chair. You'll take the carpet . . ."

And there was a little catch in Giovanna's voice as she went to put her arms round Jimmy's neck.

Jimmy drew back.

"Why do you want to behave as you have done? And what on earth do you want to come to my room for, now?" he blustered. "My mother is the best woman that ever lived."

"That's the trouble, Jimmy dear. I'm sure she is; quite the very best woman that ever lived—but I'm only honest. I have behaved naturally, and I have told the truth. Surely in such a house as this and in the presence of the best woman who ever lived, you wouldn't have me lie, or act a lie? And I have come to your

room because you didn't come to mine and say 'Good-night' nicely and as though you loved me . . ."

"Come to your bedroom, Giovanna!"

"Yes, Jimmy dear. I am equally wicked and you equally good in a drawing-room, or a morning-room, or a library, or a bed-room or a dining-room, or a bath-room, or a box-room, or a conservatory, or up on the roof, Jimmy, with our feet in the water-cistern."

"Don't talk nonsense, Giovanna; and for Heaven's sake try to please my mother, and give her a better impression of yourself."

"A false impression, Jimmy?"

"Er—no—of course not. A good impression."

"But I'm not good, Jimmy. I smoke and drink and swear and gamble and sit for poor artists who can't afford a model; and I come into a good young man's room at night; and I'm absolutely honest and truthful and never to my knowledge did a mean or nasty thing in my life—and I'm not a damned superior, pompous, righteous, censorious, self-appointed judge of other people; an unchristian and . . ."

"Do you mean to say my mother is that?" he interrupted furiously.

"Oh, Jimmy! How could you say such a dreadful thing? . . ."

And then they had really quarrelled, and

Algernon Coxe had been astonished at himself, astounded at the cruel and bitter things that he had heard himself saying.

At the height and the worst of this horrible business, Giovanna had burst into tears and sobbed :

" Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, forgive me, forgive me, darling. It is absolutely my fault . . . *all* my fault," and again attempted to fling her arms about his neck.

For the second time the angry Algernon drew back, and held out an opposing hand.

Giovanna, flushing deeply, gave him a look that he remembered to this day, remembered now, sitting on this settee, and, turning from him, went quickly from the room.

Ere she closed the door, he heard his mother's voice and hers ! They were speaking angrily —his mother's voice under better control than Giovanna's. Turning off the light he scrambled guiltily into bed—as from childhood he had done a thousand times at the sound of his mother's approach.

The door opened.

" You're not *in bed*, Algernon, are you ? "

" Er—yes, Mother."

" *Oh !* . . ."

There had been no opposition to Giovanna's catching the first train after breakfast, a meal

at which Mr. and Mrs. Dashwood Coxe had found themselves unable to be present.

§ 4

But this would not do. He couldn't sit there all day long, staring at the box and raking up the past—on the very eve of his wedding-day.

How was he to get this great box away?

The best thing would be to go out and get a taxi, and simply give the man a hand with it down the stairs.

When they got to the house, he could suggest that, for a small consideration, the taxi-man should give him a hand with it, right up to the tank-room.

That would be the best way; in fact, the only way; unless he sent a carrier or a railway-van or something, to fetch and deliver it.

No, that would mean delay and risk.

Algernon Coxe rose to his feet, idly fingered an empty wine-glass that stood on the table, looked irresolutely about the room, picked up his hat, stick and gloves, and left the flat, to return, a few minutes later, with a burly gentleman arrayed, *inter alia*, in three overcoats and a yachting cap, the cracked peak of which obscured his left eye.

Between them, the two men carried the box down to the taxi, and Algernon Coxe stood by and watched, with some anxiety and occasional

adjurations, while the taxi-man secured it upon the luggage-rack behind the cab.

"Safe, Guv'nor? Ar! Not 'arf it ain't. That there box wouldn't fall off, not if I was to drive me keb till me whiskers grew long enough to 'ide the steerin' wheel from 'uman sight . . . Ar! Not till they fair got into the machinery. No, sir, you'll fall through the bottom of this 'ere keb before that there box falls off the back of it."

The taxi-man may, or may not, have been an optimist, but Algernon Coxe found the box still in position when he sprang from the cab, as it came to a standstill outside his house; and a minute later, he and the driver were carrying it up the four flights of stairs that ended at the small landing from which opened the tank-room door.

"'Tain't 'arf 'eavy, Guv'nor," observed the taxi-man, whose sedentary life and profound belief in the nourishing, sustaining and curative properties of beer, tended to unfit him for strenuous effort.

"Well over a nundredweight, I should sye. What is it? Cloves?"

"*Cloves?*" panted Algernon.

"Yus, cloves what you wear. They comes 'eavy."

"Very heavy," agreed Algernon Coxe.

"Not as I minds what I does for a gent,"

continued the optimist, as Algernon Coxe opened the tank-room door.

"A gent what *is* a gent," he added, as his employer, having gently lowered his end of the box, felt in his pockets for money.

Completely satisfied of the perfect gentility of his fare, the taxi-man proclaimed and acknowledged it, while, with painful and stertorous strugglings, he made his devious and intricate way to the obscure hiding-place for its monetary evidence and expression—apparently a pocket on the inner side of his penultimate undervest.

Ere the front door clanged behind his helper, Algernon Coxe had dragged the box to the furthermost corner of this dark attic and hidden it as he had planned.

Nor was it until he had completed his task to his satisfaction, locked the tank-room door, pocketed the key, retired to his den, and wearily flung himself down in a big arm-chair, that he realized, with a feeling of the deepest annoyance and regret, that he had forgotten to lock the outer door of Giovanna's flat.

Anyone could walk in, merely by turning the handle of the front door.

He must go back.

It was with something of a shock that he

found the door of the flat open, and heard sounds of movement in the kitchen.

As he stood, hesitant, in the sitting-room, a stout red-faced woman, clean and tidy, entered, determined of mien and somewhat aggressive.

"Who are you?" he asked.

"The same to you, sir, and many of them," was the reply. "Walking in without knock nor ring, nor by your leave . . . I do for Miss Blayton . . .

"Did you wish to see her?" she continued, without pausing for breath. "She's not at home. And surprised I was to find her out, and when I say find her out, I mean to find her not at home, when I come as usual to cook her dinner and to do for her . . .

"Can I give 'er any messidge, or are you well-beknownst and take a seat till she comes? I reckernize your face now, sir, from the photy-grarf, or seeing you 'ere, but not knowing when or where Miss Blayton has gone, she not having said anything either way, I couldn't tell you, I'm shaw . . ."

"Miss Blayton has gone away," interrupted Algernon Coxe as the woman paused for breath.

"Ho? Meaning 'ow, sir?"

"Just what I say. She's gone away. But look here, do you mean to say you didn't know? . . . Didn't she tell you? . . . I've come to lock the place up . . . She's gone."

The woman stared open-eyed and open-mouthed, for the moment silenced by the shock of this announcement.

"My Gawd!" she whispered, and without apology, sat suddenly down upon a chair that stood conveniently close.

"'Er box! . . . I see it was gone, d'reckly I went into 'er bedroom. I said to meself I says, 'Ullo,' I says, 'er trunk's gone,' and then thinks no more about it, bein' a bit be'ind-'and, and Brunt—'e's me 'usband—in 'ospital, and a dratted nuisance that *would* go and get run over just as 'e's got a job o' work, or more like a job o' work got 'im and 'e couldn't dodge it, as I told 'im to 'is face . . . And 'ow long's she gone for, sir? . . . Bit sudden, wasn't it?"

"Very sudden."

"And well you might say it, and me 'ere till eight o'clock last night and never a word said . . . Bit sudden and a bit secret, if you arst me."

"I didn't ask you," observed Algernon Coxe, "and I've come to lock the place up. Will you shut all the windows? Miss Blayton won't be back for—oh, months, perhaps."

The woman rose to her feet, dusted with her apron the seat of the chair on which she had sat, and heaved a deep sigh.

"Light come and light go," she muttered, "and all the same a nundred years 'ence, please Gawd. Me old man out of one job and me out

of another. Thank 'Eaven 'e's in 'ospital and best place for 'im. 'Arf a mind to git run over meself . . .

"And what about my money, sir?" she asked, turning suddenly upon Algernon Coxe. "Yerse, and me notice, too. Week's money come Saturday, and a week's money in loo o' notice, too, and fair's fair, and no gettin' away from it, law or no law."

"How much would that come to?" he asked.

"Two pun . . . hrrrmmph—ahem—er—*ten*, sir," was the reply.

"Two pounds ten? Right . . . Here you are," replied Algernon Coxe. "And here's another pound, since it is, as you say, rather sudden."

"'Andsome said, sir, and 'andsome done, as the sayin' is, and no doubt Miss Blayton'll drop me a card when she comes back. As nice a young lady as ever I did for, though a rare one to flare out, if cause there was—or perhaps wasn't. . . . Yerse! Her and me was very congenital, as they say. . . . Very given to 'avin' 'er own way, and full o' maggots."

"*What?*" ejaculated Algernon Coxe.

"Full o' maggots, I said, sir. Always got some maggot in 'er 'ead, and nothink won't do, but what she must do it. Like this runnin' off now, and never an 'int to me by word o' mouth or scrape o' pen.

"Well, there it is—and then again it mayn't be, and me not knowin' you from Adam, not reely, nor Eve neither for the matter o' that, nor yet Pinch-Me as they say, and what proof? . . Ar! I s'pose you got the key?"

"Yes, I have the key and a limited stock of patience. Would you kindly close the windows and shut the doors and then I'll lock the front door," replied Algernon Coxe, producing a key.

A few minutes later Mrs. Brunt, still talking, preceded Algernon Coxe down the stairs that led to the front door of the flat vacated, for ever, by Giovanna Blayton.

THE INNER BOOK

PART II

THE LIFE AND ADVENTURES OF ALGERNON DASHWOOD COXE

PART II

CHAPTER I

ON a day a dozen years previous to that bright May morning upon which he had welcomed his old friend Colonel "Milly" Mortimer on his return from his three years' big-game shooting-trip in Africa, Doctor John Desart bowed an aged roué from his consulting-room and, closing the door behind him, observed:

"Suffering from old brandy and the delusion that he suffers from delusions."

He then seated himself at his desk and glanced at the day's list lying thereon.

"Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," he read, having crossed off the name of the aged roué.

Doctor Desart glanced at his desk clock.

"Good!" he soliloquized, "ahead of time. One need be when one has to cope with Minerva Dashwood-Coxe. What's the good of her bringing that poor boy to me again? . . . Expects me to undo, with one interview and a bottle of medicine, the harm she's been doing all day and every day, since he was born."

He touched the bell beside his desk and for the three minutes that elapsed ere the door opened and a smart parlourmaid announced: "Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," John Desart looked back into the past.

Minerva . . . Minerva Coxe whom poor Scrub Tattinger had loved so passionately and devotedly . . . What a woman! . . Poor old Clarence Coxe. How she had taken him by the scruff of the neck and married him almost the very day he'd got the Melfont Parva living!

Serve old Clarence Coxe right, for being so weak. He had never even pretended to love her. As a boy he had undoubtedly hated her, especially when she boxed his ears and rode rough-shod over him, in all things. Poor old Poodle!

Jolly lucky escape for Scrub Tattinger, if he could only realize it.

Extraordinary woman . . . Really and truly conscientious—a walking conscience, in fact.

And yet she could do the most incredible things and reconcile her conscience with them.

Probably she did only what was right because whatever she did was right because she did it.

Any other woman, treating a man as Minerva had treated Scrub Tattinger, would be a shame-

less heartless jilt, a calculating self-seeking cheat.

But not so Minerva Coxe. She had been engaged to poor old Scrub when he transferred from his British Regiment to the King's African Rifles—as she had always known he was going to do.

She had promised to "wait for him," and Scrub was going to get a good station, and they were going to be married the next year, or, with luck, even sooner, if Scrub could afford it.

And then suddenly Minerva had "experienced a Call."

Also she had searched her heart and found that she had made a terrible mistake. Her love was really for the dear companion of her childhood's days, she said, the cousin with whom she had grown up; and the promptings, nay the imperious demands, of her heart were irresistibly strengthened by the dictates of her conscience which bade her remain, as it were, in the Church—a Vicar's daughter, a Vicar's wife.

Curiously enough, this had coincided with Clarence's astonishing good luck, or rather his father's and his uncle's astonishing good "pull" influence—and Clarence's appointment to one of the best incumbencies in England. Lovely old Vicarage, lovely old village—and lovely old stipend.

And Minerva had done her duty.

Instead of wasting upon the desert air of Africa her great natural and trained gifts for parochial work, she had chosen the less spectacular, far more useful, and far more comfortable career of an English Vicar's wife.

Poor old Scrub had taken it hard, and Mortimer, in a furiously indignant letter to his old friend Long John, had said the woman ought to be scragged, as she'd spoilt the life of a fine soldier; and added that he hoped she'd spoil the life of a rotten parson.

Minerva Coxe! Now Mrs. Clarence Dashwood-Coxe, always spelt with a hyphen . . .

And this poor pitiable boy, Algernon, whose life she most certainly was spoiling without any doubt whatsoever, whether she spoilt Clarence's or not.

Minerva—Goddess of Wisdom! . . .

A tall woman, scarcely a head shorter than tall "Long John" Desart himself, a woman of imperious mien, erect carriage and commanding appearance, entered and advanced with outstretched hand and kindly, if slightly condescending, smile.

"Good-morning, Doctor," she said. "I've brought this tiresome boy of mine to see you again," and turning, indicated the somewhat shrinking, overshadowed and deprecatory figure of an overgrown weedy and pimply schoolboy

of some fifteen years, upon whose weak and pleasant face was a look of puzzled consternation.

The boy's face lit up, beamed with intelligence and pleasure, seemed indeed to come to life, or at any rate to awaken, as Doctor Desart smiled down at him and shook hands.

"Well, Algernon, old chap," said the doctor. "What have you been up to now?"

Algernon Coxe looked up at the face of this wise man who was so understanding, so discerning and sympathetic.

It was one of the faces he liked, with its kindly twinkling eyes, humorous clean-shaven mouth, long sharp nose and big cheek-bones. One could talk to this chap and feel that one was understood.

Golly! What a lucky fellow his son must be . . . Fancy having a father like him. How immeasurably different from one's own bewhiskered stuffy and unfriendly father. Rotten job being the son of the Reverend Clarence Coxe, a parson who could no more speak without preaching than he could preach without speaking.

Wouldn't it be nice if Mother would go away and let him talk to the doctor himself. But, just the opposite would happen, as before.

Of course Mother knew best. And he couldn't possibly have come here, all across London from the hotel, without her.

" How are you getting on at school ? " added Doctor Desart, dropping the boy's hand, and taking note of many things.

" Left," replied the boy, uttering his first word since entering the room. Hopeless to attempt to say more in Mother's presence.

" Ah, that's partly what I've come about," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. " You will remember that when I came to see you before, Doctor, I had just withdrawn him from the Preparatory School to which I had sent him a few weeks earlier."

" Stag-beetles," murmured Doctor Desart cryptically, a far-away look in his eyes, and a sternly repressed smile twitching at his lips.

" Algernon, go and wait outside the door," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

" Perhaps you can find your way back to the waiting-room, old chap. Do you think you can ? " asked the doctor.

" I don't know. I think . . . I . . . er . . . "

" Wait outside the door, Algernon," repeated Mrs. Coxe, and Algernon departed thence.

" Yes, exactly," continued the lady, the door being safely shut between Algernon and the horrid topic.

" I see you do remember, Doctor. I paid a surprise visit to that school, and found Algernon with a group of other boys watching two

stag-beetles fight. I was horrified to think that a child of mine should join in such a brutal pastime. But what were my feelings when Algernon, whom till then I had considered not only a nice-minded, but an absolutely pure-minded child, calmly observed :

" ' They're just as jealous as they can stick. That's why they fight. They're stag-bettles and they both want the same doe-beetle. We've put her in the other box . . .'

" I took him back home with me that very day and I . . ."

" I remember," interrupted Doctor Desart, a little sadly. " And now ? "

" And now I've had to take him away from Bullborough," continued Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

" What is it this time, I wonder," mused the doctor, as he eyed his visitor. " Jealous Elephants ? "

" I had a letter from him, and I went straight down and fetched him away by the next train."

" Got into trouble, had he ? " asked the doctor, as Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe paused, and apparently pondered the depravity of modern youth.

" Not so much into trouble as into danger . . . Bad company. Pitch and defilement. He was being laughed at for being, I thank God, more innocent than his companions. They were all making fun of him and baiting him because he

simply could not understand why they shrieked with laughter at a disgusting little poem, a Limerick I believe they call it, that one of them —the foul-minded little wretch—recited to them in the dormitory."

"Wonder which one that was," pondered the doctor.

"Was it a good . . . I mean, was it very bad?" he asked.

"I am not a judge of Limericks," replied Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe coldly. "But this was sufficiently coarse, vulgar and objectionable to make it my clear duty to go at once to the school. I interviewed both the House Master and the Head Master and brought Algernon home with me the same day."

"Did you give them the name of the boy who contributed the Limerick?"

"Certainly. And of those who shrieked with delighted comprehension and who proceeded to enlighten Algernon . . . *Enlighten* indeed. A nice school!"

"H'm! . . How did the authorities take it?" asked the doctor.

"To tell you the truth, doctor, I was surprised, pained and I may say shocked, at their attitude . . . That of the House Master was positively one of 'Boys will get hold of these things. The young beggars have a very acute if perverted sense of humour. This is really

rather funny—and fairly harmless,' and to my utter consternation and surprise, the man actually laughed heartily as he read the poem in the letter I had had from Algernon. And if you can believe it, the Head Master said the boy had probably got it direct from his father, a well-known General whose name I will not mention, though it would serve him right."

"You haven't got the Limerick, I suppose?" asked Doctor Desart, not hopefully, of course.

"I destroyed it the moment I had shown it to the School authorities."

"And so you brought Algernon home again. And now you've brought him to me. What's wrong?"

"He just isn't well, Doctor. His appetite is extremely poor; he sleeps very badly and wakes up screaming and sweating from what he describes as most awful nightmares. Then he's so—I'm afraid that . . . lazy, is the plain fact of the matter. Absolutely lazy . . . idle . . . languid . . . I can't get him to take the slightest interest in anything, nor to do anything . . . He simply moons about, and whatever I set him to do, he does thoroughly badly, carelessly, and without any interest, or taking the slightest pains."

Doctor Desart studied the speaker's face, and his expression and nod were non-committal.

"And he is absolutely without initiative.

He simply cannot and will not do a single thing unless I'm behind him or take him by the hand. . . . And he tells me lies!"

The doctor's face and nod changed, and distinctly committed him to acquiescence.

"Quite so," he said. "You spoke of nightmares. Does he dream much in the ordinary way, do you know?"

"I really couldn't say, Doctor. He doesn't tell me more than he can help. One has to dig things out of him . . . Oh yes, I remember, he certainly had one extremely nasty dream . . . In addition to his regular nightmare, that is."

"*Regular* nightmare?" commented Doctor Desart with raised eyebrows. "That's interesting and very important. We'll come to that afterwards. What was the nasty dream?"

"Oh, horrid. It upset him dreadfully. Made him ill for days. I could see there was something on his mind, and got it out of him. He actually dreamt that he had killed me."

Doctor Desart inclined his head.

"Yes," he said, almost as though he had been expecting something of the sort.

"Poor boy. A dreadful dream. He thought that I was drinking deeply of a great cup of wine—he described it as being like the chalice his father uses—and he crept up behind me and poured a deadly poison into it. I drank again

and fell dead at his feet. No wonder he's ill. Enough to make him. In my opinion . . ."

Doctor Desart interrupted the torrent of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's eloquence.

"The boy is not ill because he dreamed it," he said. "He dreamed it because he's ill."

"And what do you suppose is the matter with him, Doctor?"

"And now about this recurrent nightmare," continued the doctor, without answering the question. "What is it?"

"Oh, perfectly absurd! A lot of nonsense," expostulated Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"Dreams are apt to be that," smiled the doctor. "Or at any rate to appear so, until we understand their symbolism. What does he dream?"

"Oh, something about a box," was the reply. "He shrieks and screams and wakes up crying out '*The Box! The Box!*' and when I go to him, all he can say is that The Box is there again. Perfectly absurd! As I tell him, suppose the box *is* there, it can't do him any harm. The box won't bite him."

Doctor Desart sighed.

"He isn't in the box, I suppose," he asked . . . "Claustrophobia?"

"No. He has never said so."

"Does he know what's in the box?"

"I really haven't asked him, Doctor. Is it of any importance?"

"It may be," was the reply. "Of the utmost vital importance."

"Oh well, you'd better question him about it yourself, hadn't you?"

"I'm going to," said Doctor Desart. "How long has he been having this particular box-nightmare?"

"Oh, all his life. Since he was old enough to know what a box is. Always been a most tiresome child at night . . . Bad dreams . . . Crying set-outs . . . Idiotic fancies . . . Afraid of the dark . . ."

"And he's getting no better, eh?" enquired the doctor.

"He's getting worse. Now what do you suppose is the matter with him?"

"Several things," replied the doctor, as he tapped his blotter with a pencil, and stared at the woman before him.

"Several things, arising out of one thing. In the first place he has a bad neurosis of some kind. He suffers from an inferiority-complex and he is a born and bred introvert. And last, but very far from least, he has quite definitely what is nowadays termed a mother-complex. You may remember that I diagnosed it and warned you when you brought him to me before."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe smiled tolerantly.

"Oh, that funny fashionable rubbish," she said. "You still use the new-fangled jargon, then? I suppose doctors, like other people, have to keep abreast of the fads of the times."

And Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe laughed quite kindly.

"Yes, yes," meekly admitted Doctor John Desart, world-famed neurologist. "Still using the new-fangled jargon that Æsculapius used two or three thousand years ago. Same funny fashionable rubbish of *γνωθη σεαυτον* that appealed to him and Socrates and Plato and those other would-be-up-to-date chatterboxes . . ."

The doctor fell silent.

"Has he any pets?" he asked suddenly.

"No."

"Ever asked to be allowed to keep some?"

"Oh, he's always bothering me to let him have a dog."

"Oh, splendid," said John Desart quickly. "Get him one at once. Best thing in the world for . . ."

"I hate dogs," interrupted Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. "Detest them. Nasty smelly things. I wouldn't have one about the house for anything. Fleas; bones; scratches on the doors and furniture. Lot of bother about feeding. Certainly not."

"Very useful in a country place . . . for protection . . . tramps . . . burglars . . ."

"Thank you, Doctor. I'm certainly competent to deal with either tramps or burglars if, and when, they come to my house."

And undoubtedly she was, John Desart admitted to himself, if somewhat grudgingly.

"Outdoors?" he suggested. "A kennel in the stable-yard. The dog never need come into the house. Let Algernon take it for a long run every day. Be his salvation. Self-expression: something to care for, and protect and love."

"I will not have a dog about the place, Doctor Desart. . . . And hasn't Algernon a mother to love?"

With this point John Desart did not deal.

"Well, now," he said. "What about a cat? Suppose he had a dear little fluffy kitten of his very own. He could lavish all his . . ."

"I object to cats as much as to dogs," was the cold reply. "A great nuisance. Smell; bring others; hideous noises in the night. No."

"A pair of rabbits, then?"

"Most certainly not."

"Well, one rabbit, then," suggested the doctor patiently, averting a mental eye from stag-beetles.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe declined to pursue the

subject of pets, and indicated the fact by ignoring the doctor's further remarks on the subject.

"That's that, then," he said at length, and again paused as speculatively he eyed Minerva Coxe.

"Well now, what are we to do about it?" he continued. "You bring the boy to me. I tell you what's wrong and, as before, you've neither faith in my diagnosis nor intention of taking my advice. Merely a waste of my time and your money."

"What is your advice, Doctor?" the lady humoured him.

"Let him come into my nursing-home for a month or two and I'll guarantee that he makes a new adjustment to life . . . I'll promise to give him a new attitude . . . new values . . ."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe made a movement of her right hand as though brushing away cobwebs or flicking crumbs from the lap of her mind.

"What can you do there that I cannot do at home?" she asked with sweet reasonableness.

"Much," was the terse reply.

"As, for example?"

"In the first place keep him away from home and mother, and . . ."

"My dear Doctor Desart, would you kindly tell me what's wrong with his home and mother that he should be saved from them. Am I a particularly bad specimen of a mother?"

"Yes, about as bad a specimen as you'd find in a day's march," John Desart assured her, "for this boy, in his present condition, that is. It's exactly what he's suffering from. That and nothing else. A severe and prolonged attack of mother. An attack that has lasted for about fifteen years, save for those two brief periods of convalescence at school.

"And I tell you, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, it's death and damnation. It's red ruin, mind, body and soul, for that boy, if you won't let him have a mind of his own, a life of his own, a will of his own."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe rose to her feet. She had heard more than enough of the man's nonsense and of his rash and foolish words.

"Thank you, Doctor," she said. "I shall certainly not send him to your, or anybody else's, nursing-home."

"Well then, for God's sake, or rather for the boy's sake, send him back to school, if they'll take him.

"And if they won't, see if you can get him into another. Failing that, send him to Oxford or Cambridge at the very earliest date at which they'll take him, and, meanwhile, send him away from home somewhere . . . Anywhere . . . Let him visit . . . Send him for a voyage . . . Let him travel with a tutor,

provided he's the right sort of person. I could get you the very man."

"Thank you, Doctor. Pray do not trouble further. Algernon will remain at home. I rather fancy that a boy's mother may possibly be as good for him as a hired stranger . . . I may perhaps consider the question of Oxford or Cambridge a few years hence. Good-morning."

"Well, if you bring him to me again before that time comes, I'll refrain from saying 'I told you so,' Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe."

"Can't you give him some medicine or suggest something sensible—er—I mean—er—something different?"

"Medicine's no earthly good," replied the doctor, "and I have suggested not merely something sensible, but the only thing sensible. And—might I have a few words with Algernon alone?"

"Alone, behind my back, do you mean? Whatever for?"

"Oh, young people often 'open up' better when they are not in the parental presence."

"'Open up,'" said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, with mingled distaste and surprise. "I should be exceedingly sorry to think that Algernon had anything to say to you that I could not hear."

"No, no, of course he hasn't, and I assure

you I've nothing to say to Algernon, either, that is unfitted for your ears."

"Very well then, Doctor, have him in and talk to him, by all means, in my presence."

John Desart sighed.

"I should like to ask him about that nightmare, anyhow," he said, and, going to the door of his consulting-room, he opened it and smilingly beckoned to the boy who stood without, dutifully awaiting the commands of his mother.

"Come and have a chat with me, Son," said the doctor; and taking young Algernon by the arm, he conducted him to the desk, seated himself, and, placing the boy with his back to his mother, strove to put him at his ease and get *en rapport*—in the circumstances an extremely difficult task.

A long chain of questions and answers followed, and soon the boy's face brightened, and a clear glimpse could be seen of what he might have been in different environment and with a normal up-bringing. John Desart sighed as he contemplated the changing face, and saw eager interest and intelligence take the place of apathy, dullness and hopeless misery.

"Never mind, old chap," he said at length. "We'll soon get you all right, and make you want to play all the games there are, and read all the jolly books ever written . . . First of all, we're going to stop these wretched dreams

that bother you . . . I want you to tell me all about this nightmare that you often get."

Algernon looked up quickly, fear in his eyes, and the doctor was aware of a mental shudder as the boy instinctively recoiled.

"*The Box!*" he whispered.

"Yes, tell me all about it."

"There's nothing to tell," was the reply. "It's simply there . . . And I nearly die of fright."

"Yes, but why? What happens?"

"Nothing. Nothing at all. It's simply there. It's awful."

"Are you afraid you're going to be shut up in it?"

"Oh, no . . . No . . ."

"Do you know what's in it?"

"No."

"Is it open or shut?"

"Oh, shut. Always shut. Tight."

"In the dream, are you afraid that it's going to spring open?"

"Oh, no . . . No . . ."

"I see. It's just a shut box that stays shut, and you don't know what's in it . . . But you're terrified by it."

"Terrified to death. I nearly die of funk. It's awful."

"There you are, Doctor," broke in Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe impatiently. "Just as I said.

All a lot of nonsense. Perfectly absurd. A great boy like that . . ."

"How big is the box?" asked the doctor.

"Oh, big enough to get into."

"But you never dream that you've got to get into it?"

"Oh, no . . . No."

"Have you ever seen a box like it?"

'Oh, no . . . No."

"I expect you have, if you could only remember.

"Now think. Have you ever been playing with other children—when you were a kid, I mean—and got into a big coffer? One of those things you sometimes see in the hall or in a corridor . . . big old boxes they keep for garden cushions and rugs, and that sort of thing."

"Oh, no . . . No."

"Never got into a big box in your life?"

"Never. Oh, no, never. No."

"Sure? Absolutely certain?"

"Perfectly certain."

"Well now, look here. You know that poem 'Ginevra'?"

The boy shook his head.

"Oh, come! I'm sure you must have read it or heard the story."

"No."

"Oh, but surely. About the girl, you know."

"What did she do, Sir?"

"Oh, think . . . You know what she did. Ginevra and the old oak chest."

"No. What did she do?"

"You really don't know . . . H'm . . . It isn't that then. I thought perhaps you'd read about Ginevra and got her on your young mind without knowing it.

"Well now, look here, old chap, believe me, that's a perfectly harmless ordinary box and contains nothing more terrible than pots of raspberry-jam and tins of sardines, potted-meat, biscuits . . . It's a tuck-box!"

And Doctor Desart laughingly clapped the boy upon the shoulder and gently shook him.

Algernon Coxe was not amused.

"Now, look here," continued the doctor. "When you go home I want you to write down all you know about this box. Just describe it to me and, if you can, draw a sketch of it. Then write at the bottom:

"'*It's an ordinary common box and couldn't possibly harm me or anybody else.*' Will you do that?"

"No," was the uncompromising reply. "I couldn't. Besides, it would be a lie . . . It *can* harm me, and it will . . . It will be the death of me."

"Algernon!" said his mother sharply. "You'll do exactly what Doctor Desart tells you."

"Yes, Mother," replied the boy and sighed heavily as Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe rose to conclude this unsatisfactory interview.

§ 2

On the following day Algernon Coxe fought with beasts at Ephesus, or rather at Melfont Parva; beasts incarnate and carnate; and, against all probability and his own expectation, displayed courage, moral and physical.

For he sat himself down and, albeit trembling and bathed in a cold perspiration, wrote a full account of his recurrent nightmare, and added a crude drawing of the box.

"Dear Doctor Desart," he wrote,—

"I'm awfully sorry. Mother says I am an abject coward, as well as a fool, and she's quite right, but it's awful when the box comes and my heart quite stops and then thumps like a fellow kicking on your door, and I tremble and sweat and want to shriek and scream the house down and to bunk for my life. But I can't make a sound and can't move. It is like I am bound hand and foot and gagged. And then there is a strangling round my neck, and then I fall and fall and fall for ever, and I rather think I faint.

"There isn't much I can tell you about the

box, but it's always the same, and I should know it at once if I saw it anywhere. I jolly well hope I don't, though, for I think I should disgrace myself again in some way. Fall down dead, or run round yelling.

" It's a big box, like a trunk. With a heavy lid. It is made of steel and very strong, and it has two key-holes. It is big enough for me to get into, but, as I told you, I do not do so. It is always shut and locked. I do not try to open it, but I know it is locked. I have not the least idea what is in it, but it is something very terrible.

" You say it is a tuck-box and there is raspberry jam and sardines in it, but I am sorry to seem rude, Doctor, but it isn't. It is something too terrible for words. One thing I do know is that somehow it'll kill me. It is dreadful even to talk or write about it, and I feel ill and have that choking feeling round my neck while I do so.

" Here is the drawing. It is not good, as I can't draw much, but it shows you the shape and preportions.

" I am sorry I am such a fool and a coward, Doctor. Do try and cure me of it, if you can, but it is no good.

" Yours most respectfully,

" ALGERNON COXE."

Having completed his very painful task, the boy took the letter to his mother for approval or, more probably, for disapproval.

"Yes," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe when she had read this human document. "Yes, a nice letter for *my* son to have to write, isn't it? And can't you spell 'proportions' correctly yet? A nice confession of weakness and cowardice. Anyone would think you were some seven-year-old neurotic cottage-child, with neither education nor self-control . . . some wretched epileptic of tainted stock. Aren't you ashamed of yourself?"

"Yes, Mother, I am," truthfully answered Algernon Coxe, and departed to post his letter, deeply thankful that he had not been made to write it all again.

Turning from the pillar-box, near which stood a small knot of loutish youths, Algernon consulted his watch, and for a minute, gazing absent-mindedly at its face, hung in doubt.

What should he do? It was rotten at home and there was nothing to do. It was rotten out-of-doors and there was nowhere to go.

Returning his watch to his waistcoat pocket and thrusting his hands into those of his trousers, he slouched down the High Street of Melfont Parva, his eyes on the ground.

Dissatisfied, discontented, moody and miserable, he wandered aimlessly on, and found him-

self out in the open country. He climbed a stile, crossed a couple of fields, stood a while on the old Norman bridge that spans the Melfont Avon, and stared unseeingly at the deep and swirling water below.

Yes, if a chap jumped in there one night with a brick in each hand and a couple more in the side-pockets of his coat, his troubles would soon be over. No more nightmares and naggings and pi-jaws then. And he'd give no more trouble to his mother, either. But on the other hand, the doing of it would give her a frightful lot of trouble. There would be an inquest, and it would be in all the papers.

Absolutely rotten for his mother. A very cowardly thing to do, too.

But then, of course, he was a coward. His mother had always told him so, and there could be no doubt about it.

But it would also be a very ungentlemanly thing to do, and he hoped he was fairly gentlemanly, albeit a weakling and a coward.

One ought to face one's trouble and stick it out, not pity one's wretched self and try to dodge it by suicide.

And anyhow he was probably even too big a coward to do such a cowardly thing as commit suicide. He'd funk jumping into the water when it came to it, so that was that.

Perhaps he'd have the jolly luck to die young.

If so, he'd cease being a trouble and a nuisance and an anxiety to his mother, without any of the beastliness of suicide.

Would she be sorry if he died ? Why should anybody be sorry to see the last of such a mouldy specimen as himself ? She'd be a bit sorry because that would be only decent, and because his mother was everything that was decent. Best mother anybody ever had, and really quite kind if only one gave her a chance by not being such a fool and a coward and giving her so much trouble.

She wouldn't punish him and pi-jaw him so much if she didn't love him and want to do the best for him.

All this nagging when you did wrong, and scolding and beating and being sent to your room on bread-and-water was all done for your good, and serve you jolly well right. As his mother so often said, ' Spare the rod and spoil the child ', and it was because she loved him that she didn't intend him to be spoilt for the want of a few beatings—or a jolly lot of beatings, either.

Solomon said it too, and he was the wisest man who ever lived. Golly, he must have been a busy man if he beat all his children himself.

Yes, it all proved how much his mother loved him.

But why did his father hate him so? From the first minute that he'd been old enough to know anything at all, he had known that his father really hated him. And undoubtedly he used to beat him because he enjoyed doing it, and not because he wanted to do him any good.

His father certainly beat him because he hated him, just as his mother beat him because she loved him.

He knew that perfectly well, because his father used to beat him when he was quite a tiny child—before he was old enough to do anything wrong. Father would do it when mother was away from home—but she had seen the marks one day, and asked him about it. He had tremblingly confessed that he had received a beating, and, curiously enough, his mother had not been angry with him.

She had sent him out into the garden and gone straight to father's study, and through the window of that room the sound of her voice had proceeded for quite a long time. It had almost sounded as though she were angry with father.

And he had never beaten him again from that day to this—but he had hated him all the more.

Of this Algernon was perfectly certain. One could always tell when people hated one—even

from the way they looked at one, as well as from their manner, words and acts.

He could never remember his father speaking kindly to him, or ever giving him a caress. He did not believe that his father had ever kissed him. That was one good thing, anyhow.

Algernon yawned and stretched himself. Better mouch home. Mother would want to know exactly where he'd been and what he'd been doing; and he couldn't very well say he'd been standing on the Avon Bridge and staring at the water. She'd want to know what he had been thinking about while he did so. It would be a bit difficult to explain.

As he turned from the parapet of the bridge to go back to the field-path, he saw approaching three of the youths who had been loafing at the corner when he posted his letter. Not village boys, but lads who strolled over from Bardsall on Saturdays and Sundays and very frequently on Mondays, too, especially in the season of bird-nesting, ripe-fruit-picking and other occasions when sleepy Melfont Parva offered attractions superior to those of the rather horrible town in which they worked, or evaded work.

Of a more sophisticated class, these, than the genuine country boys, inclined when in groups and bands to be a little truculent and

dangerous, and known to local respectable youth as The Blags, The Cads, or That Lot from Bardsall; and many minor and some major offences were rightly or wrongly laid at their door.

Of this particular trio, one, the leader, was a rough-looking ragged fellow, some seventeen years of age; the others, smaller, dirtier and possibly more ragged, appeared to be a year or so younger.

"Please can you tell me the time?" whined the leader, halting in the narrow path immediately in front of Algernon, his two satellites closing in on either side.

"With pleasure," smiled the delighted Algernon courteously, and proudly drew from his waistcoat pocket the watch that his mother had given him on his recent birthday.

Algernon had looked forward with most pleasurable anticipation to the receipt of this long-promised watch. It would be lovely to possess such a thing, such a recognized attribute of adolescence, if not manhood.

It would be almost as good as having a pet, a thing that, alas, he had never been allowed to have, in spite of unconquerable yearnings. (Oh, if he could only have a dog, a cat, a rabbit, a white rat, or even a mouse of his very own.)

Because a watch is not like a dead thing.

It goes, if it doesn't move about. If it can't talk, it can tell you the time, and you can undoubtedly listen to it. He could almost make a companion of a watch.

Of course, it was not to be compared with a dog or any nice warm responsive animal, but, as he might have known would be the case, things had not turned out as he expected. He had indeed received the watch on his birthday —a very nice silver one, with his name engraved on it, and the name of his mother, as well as a text and an adjuration.

Yes, on the cover was the inscription,

"To A. D. Coxe
From his Mother, Minerva Dashwood-Coxe."

Beneath this was an All-Seeing Eye and the text,

"Thou God Seest Me,"

the whole concluding with the urgent words, engraved in capital letters,

"TIME FLIES! BE PUNCTUAL!"

And after breakfast on this solemn day, the watch had been presented to him; presented, indeed, rather than given, by his mother, with many well-chosen words. A brief kindly and helpful—sermon almost.

Algernon had stood with hand outstretched to receive the watch, and Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had sat with hand outstretched holding the watch while she spoke. And ere all was said Algernon, clumsy, foolish and unworthy fellow, had allowed his tiring arm to sink to his side.

The gist of the little Address was that this Watch should be for ever a Token to him and also a kind of moral Goad as well as a concrete and constant Reminder that duty must be promptly done; that Punctuality is the Courtesy of Kings; and that Time, like an ever-rolling stream, bears all its sons away, it being notorious that they die forgotten, as a dream dies at the opening day.

And this to Algernon had seemed as a grain of comfort.

He would, his mother hoped, the Watch helping, never be late for a meal or indeed any other appointment; never miss a train; never be late in going to bed or rising from it.

He would, she hoped, wind it each night at nine o'clock, neither earlier nor later—each night for the next quarter of a century at least, perhaps half a century, or even more, for the life of a good watch carefully used and properly treated was almost endless.

By the time he had received the thing, had failed to express his gratitude with appropriate eloquence, facility and grace, and had retired

with it to his bedroom, it was but a cold-faced unfriendly monitor instead of the beloved pet and companion that he had intended it to be. Ere long it became a thing of which to take such care that it was an anxiety and a nuisance —a ticking conscience ; and, rather than friend, a treacherous foe that prevented all use of the former valuable excuse.

" I'm awfully sorry I'm late, Mother, but I didn't know the time."

Still it was very gratifying when, as did occasionally happen, people asked the time, and one had the pleasure and the pride of giving them the required information.

So Algernon readily drew forth his watch as the ragged youth whined,

" Please can you tell me the time ? "

And the ragged youth promptly snatched it— the chain faithfully following, as it tore through the buttonhole of his waistcoat.

As he did so, the two smaller boys sprang upon Algernon, each swiftly seizing him by an arm.

Surprised almost beyond words, shocked to the depths of his soul at such rudeness, violence, treachery and ungentlemanly conduct, Algernon gasped in amazement.

What on earth should he do ?

What would his mother have him do ?

He knew perfectly well that she would never have him quarrel or fight. Why, it was one of the very bad sins, not nearly as terrible as that vague but deadly and awful thing called Sex, but still very bad.

Why, it was what Jesus Christ insisted on almost more strongly than anything.

Love one another. If a man smite you on the right cheek . . . Blessed are the meek . . . Love thy neighbour as thyself . . . Do unto others . . .

Yes, but this beastly boy had got his mother's watch, the watch he had been exhorted to cherish as the apple of his eye, to guard as his most precious and cherished possession, and to wind every night for fifty years.

What would his mother say if he let a boy come along and simply take it away from him?

Yes, and what would his mother say if, roughly and rudely and vulgarly, he fought and quarrelled and struggled with a Blag?

Think of his father's son doing such a thing.

Nice occupation for the son of Melfont Parva Vicarage.

"I say, you can't do that," he cried, as these thoughts flashed through his mind. "You can't take my . . ."

"Can't I? Watch me," was the reply, as the youth thrust his booty into his trousers' pocket.

"I say, that's mine."

"You're a liar. It's mine now," was the prompt debateable answer.

"It's stealing," expostulated Algernon. "You must give it back to me at once."

"*Shee*-urrupp," growled the boy. "Shut yer mouth before I do it for yer.

"'Old 'im while I do a bunk," he bade his satellites, "and don' let 'im go till I'm on the road . . .

"On the road to Brickwell," he added, to make it clear to Algernon that it was not in Bardsall that he would be found by anyone so foolish as to pursue the matter further.

And turning, he shuffled off at a quick jog-trot.

Algernon's watch was going rapidly out of Algernon's life, and the realization promptly decided him as to the relative enormities of the sins of fighting and of being unfaithful to a trust. Either contained the sin of disobedience, so better to sin and regain the watch than to sin by losing it.

This point clearly grasped, Algernon most promptly lapsed from grace, and the gentle youth suffered a sea change into something wild and strange.

Undoubtedly there was some ancestral fighting strain in Algernon which even his mother's careful and excellent upbringing had failed to

eradicate; for a strange Old Adam swiftly and suddenly arose within him from beneath layer upon layer of blanketing apathy, sluggishness, meek mildness and the more Christian virtues. His eyes blazed, his teeth clenched, and with a curiously swift plunge he flung himself forward between his restraining captors, violently withdrawing, as he did so, an arm from the clutch of each.

Algernon was free, furious, and futile, for, alas, he knew not the first elementary thing about self-defence, and even less about offence.

With tears of rage, indignation and excitement gathering in his eyes, he swung his open hand, somewhat in the manner of one who bowls a cricket ball, at the impish and ferocious face of one of the boys. To their great and equal and mutual surprise, a resounding slap was heard—and felt—and the boy staggered back, a hurt look upon his unpleasing face.

"Cor!" he gasped, in indignation, "Cop 'im, 'Ennery," and applied a ragged coat-sleeve to his nose as he dodged behind Algernon.

And then, by all the standards of well-bred and well-taught boys, Algernon fell from grace, for as 'Ennery protruded a curling tongue and two bony fists, Algernon kicked him well and truly in the stomach, as the other boy's hand grasped him by the collar from behind.

In extenuation, but not condonement, of this

horrid deed, it may be pointed out that Algernon was extremely well bred in the belief that every sort and kind of fighting is sinful, beastly, utterly anathema, and that, as has been said, he was not well taught, nor taught at all, in the art of self-defence, much less in the honourable and sporting niceties of its practice.

Nay, he had been taught that even self-defence was wrong and that, smitten, rather than resent it, one should invite another smite.

And these facts did not so much cramp his style as bring it about that he had no style at all, but became a perfectly natural fighting animal, fighting perfectly naturally with what means and weapons Nature had provided. Hence the inexcusable kick.

'Ennery doubled up in horrid pain.

"Kill 'im, Arfur," he groaned as Algernon, swinging instantly about, instinctively clenched his right fist.

In this instance, instinct appeared inferior to reason or training, for Algernon's thumb was inside his closed fingers instead of reposing upon their knuckles.

Flinging his left arm as though in deep affection about his assailant's neck, Algernon, albeit receiving blows, bore the boy clumsily and heavily to the ground, and as he lay partly across him, thumped his nose repeatedly and most painfully with the under-side of his fist,

exactly as though he was stabbing him with a dagger.

It was as if something long pent-up in Algernon now burst forth, and had its dreadful way; for, leaping up from the definitely defeated Arfur, he rushed at 'Ennery, flung this time both his arms about him, thrust his left leg behind him, tripped him, fell with him, arose, stamped upon 'Ennery's stomach, and then, safe from hampering pursuit, turned and flew, like arrow from the bow or bird from the twig, and swiftly chased the retreating bandit-in-chief.

"Hi!" he called as he ran panting. "Stop. Give me back my watch," and sped the faster.

The principal villain of the piece, glancing round at his pursuer, made swift appreciation of the situation; for here, untrammelled, came the owner, or late owner, of the watch; and there, in the further field, his faithless or crushed custodians supine sat.

What could have happened?

Bribery and corruption, or rude violence?

Henry and Arthur he would in either case eviscerate; but first he must perform the like office upon this yelping pup that dared vociferously assail him. That noisy mouth must be shut, or there'd be a reg'ler hue and cry.

Wheeling about, he mercifully, or astutely, gave the rash and foolish pursuer a chance.

"Shut it," he cried. "'Op it. Bung off. I don't want nothink to do with you."

"Give me back my watch," shouted Algernon, slowing up.

"I 'aven't got yer watch. Why, I ain't even got one o' me own. You never 'ad a watch, and I ain't seen a watch, not since next week. Go away, I tell yer."

"Give me my watch," repeated Algernon, halting a few feet from the villain.

"I'll give yer a bash on the jaw," offered the villain. "That do instead?"

"Give me my watch," reiterated Algernon.

"Look 'ere, you're making yourself a nuisance. 'Oo d'yer think you're insultin'? You bleedin' little . . . You bung off, or I'll do yer in, ugly."

And with astonishing singleness of purpose, as well as of conversational topic, Algernon again cried,

"Give me back my watch."

It was too much; for neither by temperament nor training was the villain a patient person, nor one who suffered fools gladly.

With a quiet and sinister

"*'Ave* it, then," that had no allusion to the watch, he advanced upon Algernon, his right hand clenched and his left clutching.

Swiftly Algernon retreated.

He had not the slightest intention of doing

battle, honourable or otherwise, with this big, grim, and dangerous-looking lout ; but he was going to stick to him and follow him, yea, unto the world's end or the gates of Hell, and until he either died or recovered his mother's watch. . . .

The youth rushed and Algernon fled.

The youth resumed his swift passage to the road and Algernon pursued.

The youth turned about and, with a swift dash, almost captured his mosquito adversary. Algernon just escaped, saved principally by the villain's anxiety to quit the scene of his villainy and profitably to dispose of the proceeds thereof.

Arrived at the stile leading into the road, the thief climbed on to it, and from that vantage point halloed and beckoned to his followers, now without marked speed or enthusiasm approaching along the foot-path.

Algernon hovered near, and Henry and Arthur drew nearer still.

In haste, yet hanging in doubt as to the reliability of his satellites the principal villain bawled instructions, bidding them seize, hamper, delay, intimidate or destroy Algernon what time he, their leader, fled to safety and emolument.

Great rewards should follow their obedience and success, hideous punishment their disobedience or failure.

Courageous, vengeful, and restored, Henry and Arthur converged upon Algernon as their leader leapt from the stile and ran down the road in the direction of distant Bardsall.

After him dashed Algernon, hotly pursued by Henry and Arthur.

"Cop 'old of 'im, 'Ennery," bawled Arthur, as the latter almost caught Algernon at the stile.

Over the obstacle went Algernon, and sprinted in the wake of the chief bandit, out-distancing his own pursuers as he ran.

Suddenly and swiftly the bandit wheeled about and, ripping out an ugly oath, rushed back at Algernon, now trapped between high-hedged steep banks, foes before him and behind.

The speed of his running brought Algernon almost into the arms of his chief opponent, and it was all he could do to check himself, halt, and back away from the big lout's quick *volte-face* and onslaught.

Back away he did, only to stumble and fall, half-sitting, on a low pile of stones left by road-menders ; but instantly he arose, his right hand held back and downward, and, as he gained his balance, the hand flew forward violently.

Straight and true, a great stone crashed heavily into the face of the on-coming thief, who halted, sagged at the knees, and fell without a sound.

Henry and Arthur, as one man, came to a sudden standstill, stared in horror and fled incontinent.

From the trousers' pocket of his fallen foe, Algernon retrieved his watch and departed thence, his purpose achieved.

Algernon Coxe had dared to be like Daniel, had dared to stand alone, had dared to have a purpose firm and dared to make it known.

Positively, Algernon Coxe had had a purpose and had achieved it.

But what had he done?

He, Algernon Coxe, his mother's son, had been guilty of the enormity, the vulgarity, the degradation, the unchristian sin—of fighting.

He who knew perfectly well that not only in aggression but even in self-defence it is wrong to fight.

But really this had not been in self-defence. It had been in defence of his mother's watch.

Had it been any piece of personal and private property such as his pocket-knife, he would have let it go. Possibly his mother would take that into consideration when, in explanation of his torn collar and bruised face and cut lip, he made confession.

. . . . . .

"What! What is this? What have you been doing, Algernon?" cried Mrs. Dashwood-

Coxe on catching sight of what she could hardly believe to be her son.

"Fighting, Mother. I . . ."

"*What* did you say? Fighting? With whom?"

"Some Blags from Bardsall or somewhere. They . . ."

"Go at once to your room. I will come to you in an hour's time."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe always allowed an hour to elapse—whether that she might not strike in anger, or that the culprit might have an hour's anticipation of what he was about to receive, is not known.

Punctually at the expiration of an hour, as the cold unsympathetic face of his watch informed him, Algernon was punished with a conscientious care and skill, about which Doctor John Desart, a prejudiced person, might have found something almost sadistic. Nor did the plain facts with which he first tried to appease his mother avail him any more than the lies he assayed when the truth, as usual, failed to save him.

CHAPTER II

FOR the next three or four years, Algernon Dashwood Coxe, an only child, enjoyed, or endured, the concentrated blessings of his strong mother's watchful care and guidance.

If ever a youth was sheltered from wickedness and shielded from harm, it was he.

Of him, as of her husband, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe could, and did, say that he had never caused her a moment's anxiety. This statement was true in a sense—the sense in which she used it, but it was not the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth, for although Algernon never intentionally caused her any anxiety, she did occasionally experience anxious moments when contemplating his appearance, health and habits.

His appearance certainly left something to be desired.

He held himself badly, slouched and shuffled.

He was prone to considerable untidiness as to hair, collar, tie and dress generally.

Though distinctly good-looking, he was apt to be pimply, pasty, dull-eyed and pale.

Only on those occasions when it occurred to his mother to suggest it, did he shave, with the result that his face was generally in a condition of callow fluffiness that added nothing to his attractiveness.

His health was really not very bad and was certainly not at all good. He complained, or rather he did not complain, of the violent headaches by which he was racked, and he complained but little of the frequent attacks of bilious misery which at this period darkened his life.

But so careful, probing and watchful a mother as his, could not fail at times to see that he was ill.

As to his habits, it may at once be stated that he had no bad ones and it may be added that he had few that were good.

He had not the habit of regular work, of regular exercise, or of regular reading. He had no hobby, no pursuit, no interest.

He mooned about, bored and depressed, and, generally speaking, did literally nothing when not accompanying his mother upon her various social, parochial, and domestic duties.

With her he drove about, making calls, visiting sick and aged parishioners, "paying the books" weekly at the shops, and with her he pottered harmlessly in the church, the churchyard and the Vicarage garden.

He made no friends of his own age, partly

through lack of inclination, partly for want of opportunity, and largely because his mother had doubts of the suitability of most young people of his own sex, and graver doubts of the suitability of young people of the other.

One queer friend he had—an aged maiden lady, an aunt of his father's who, though not really insane, entertained the bitterest hatred of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

Moreover she was a person of such deep cunning that she contrived to conceal this regrettable and indeed lamentable emotion with such success that its object was the last person to suspect it; and whenever Miss Smithers invited Algernon to visit her, as she frequently did, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was quite pleased for him to go.

What possible harm could come of his sojourning beneath the roof of an ancient gentlewoman, own aunt to the Rector of Melfont Parva, and who had in her service no hand-maiden whose years were less than sixty and whose morals less than perfect?

Between Algernon and this remarkable and eccentric old woman there were real affection and considerable understanding; and it came as a surprise to none when, at her death at the age of eighty-nine, she left him the house in London at which he had been so frequent and welcome a visitor, the whole of its contents, including

the said aged and incorruptible hand-maidens, and her funded property producing the comfortable income of a little over a couple of thousand pounds a year.

It is distressing to have to relate that, when the Will was read, Miss Smithers' reputation suffered some eclipse (in the Melfont Parva Vicarage), by reason of the fact that she had caused therein to be set down the words:

"And I do hope that my said beloved great-nephew Algernon will with this money among other things purchase himself a pair of breeches and wear them like a man for up to this present day of writing the breeches in that house are worn by the wrong person whereof I name no names."

It was perhaps fortunate for Algernon that there were no other heirs presumptive to arise and contest the Will.

For, as the shocked Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe observed, the testator was obviously of unsound mind—a mind almost as unsound as was her counsel and advice.

It was perhaps as well for Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's peace of mind that she did not fully grasp the seriousness of Miss Smithers' madness, and never heard a conversation that took place between her and Algernon on the occasion of their last meeting.

"And does your mother still take a cold

bath every morning, a warm one before dinner, and a hot one when going to bed?"

"I think so, Auntie."

"And wash her hands about six times every hour?"

"I think so, Auntie."

"H'm. Quite like Lady Macbeth, eh? . . . Never addresses you as '*Spot*' by any chance?"

"Good gracious, no, Auntie."

"Does she ever get any letters from Africa?"

"I don't know, Auntie."

"I thought perhaps you collect foreign stamps. But of course you wouldn't be allowed to waste your time so foolishly. . . . You neither waste nor spend time, do you, Algernon? Do you save time?"

"No, Auntie."

"Well, I hope to God I shall live till you grow up, and that I have my health and strength to show you how to waste and spend it both. . . ."

However, Miss Smithers' pious hope was frustrated, and she died without doing anything worse than leave Algernon her money.

§ 2

But this happened after Algernon's term at Oxford. Literally a term.

As Doctor Desart had anticipated, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe brought her son to him again;

and again the doctor gave her good advice, and forbore to say, "I told you so."

"Let's see. How old is he now?" mused John Desart, eyeing the sickly youth and pitying him profoundly.

"Eighteen and a half."

"Well then, I prescribe Oxford or Cambridge. Now look here, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. I am in a position to help you here, for, as it happens, Angus Taggart is a very old friend and patient of mine. . . . Will overwork himself. . . . As you may know, he's a prominent and influential Tutor at St. Just's.

"Now I'll write to him and pull a string or two. Let the boy go in October—and *let him alone*. Let him paddle his own canoe now. He's quite old enough to do so, and quite competent. I'll ask Angus Taggart to keep a special eye on him, and I'll tell the boy to go straight to him, at once, if he gets into any kind of trouble or difficulty. But he won't."

"But his health, Doctor, his health," interrupted the sceptical Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"Exactly. Just the very reason why I want you to send him there," continued John Desart patiently. "He wants rousing, taking out of himself, waking up. You can't keep him tied to your apron-strings till he's bald, you know. He's got to go under his own

power some day; steer his own boat. . . . What's to happen to him when you die?"

"I leave that in God's hands," replied the Vicar's wife, and there was a note of reproof in her voice as she eyed the doctor.

"Then why not leave a little more in God's hands?" enquired the doctor hardily. "Send the boy to Oxford, and leave his whole career in God's hands. God is just as competent while you're alive, you know. You need not wait until your death to 'leave him in God's hands.' Surely, with all the parental care, nurture and admonition that the boy's had, he can be trusted out of your sight?"

"It is not a case of trusting Algernon out of my sight, Doctor Desart. It is merely that I adhere to the not unreasonable belief that a boy's best friend is his mother, and that she is the person best fitted to understand him, to guide him . . ."

"But not to prevent him in all his doings, in the modern sense of 'prevent,' Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," interrupted the doctor.

Algernon's mother rose to her feet, filled once again with a sense of annoyance and frustration.

However, Algernon should go to St. Just's, and then nobody could say she had not done everything possible, and taken Doctor Desart's advice.

A thoroughly irritating, aggravating and tarsome man, but the best doctor in Harley Street, or in England for the matter of that, and recommended to her by the Bishop himself. And was at school with Clarence.

"May I have a word with Algernon alone?" smiled John Desart wryly, as he touched his bell.

"I really fail to see any necessity for your talking with Algernon behind my back, Doctor Desart. You have seen him and sounded him thoroughly, in my presence, and if there is anything more you want to say to him, send for him by all means. But really . . ."

"Good-bye, good-bye, my dear lady. And if you don't keep away from Oxford while Algernon's there, don't bring him to me any more. There'll be no need to do so, if you'll leave him alone."

. . . . . .

Algernon Coxe went to Oxford and his mother —albeit she took him there, established him comfortably according to her ideas, interviewed his Tutor, the Bursar, the Dean, the Warden, his scout and the hall-porter, and gave each of these personages and persons the benefit of her views and opinions—left him alone for a whole term.

This proved to be the happiest period, save one, of Algernon's life.

On the day that he came down from Oxford at the end of term, his mother submitted him to a close inquisition, applying her relatively mild and gentle Third Degree, and decided, there and then, that to Oxford Algernon would not return.

For he admitted that young men there talked quite frequently and freely about—*Sex!*

It must undoubtedly have been a severe blow to the young man, and, not for the first time in his life, he came to the conclusion that he was a fool to tell his mother absolutely everything, and that it was about time he asserted himself and opposed his will to hers.

And, not for the first time in his life, Algernon discovered that it was vain to attempt to hide anything whatsoever from his mother, and puerile folly to suppose that he possessed a will that could for one moment withstand that of his strong-minded, determined and powerful mother.

As well might a frog oppose a steam-roller.

And once more, Algernon settled down at home and, with the advantage of his father's library, made a desultory study of Theology in pursuance of a somewhat nebulous plan dependent on his mother's some day discovering a Theological College of suitable type and status. It is, of course, obvious and axiomatic, as she

said, that human conduct, and indeed human nature, manifest themselves so differently in a Theological College, and render these latter so superior in every way to the mere lay and secular colleges of Oxford, Cambridge, and other Universities.

When not lying on his bed and reading theological or other works of fact and fiction, Algernon mooned miserably about the house and garden; accompanied his mother about her parochial and social occasions; and developed, at any rate, a praiseworthy deftness and aplomb in the drawing-room.

Few young laymen, indeed few curates, could compete with him in the nice conduct of a clouded cup or cake; in the swinging of a four-tiered cake-stand; in the carrying of three, or even four empty cups for replenishment; in the keeping of the ball of conversation rolling exactly where it should, along the lines indicated by his mother.

Yet, the more expert and efficient he became, and the more his mother praised him and proclaimed her intention of making him her curate, the more did something good and fine in Algernon bid him rise up and hate himself, his life and his . . . Good God, no—not *his mother!*

No, no . . . a thousand times, no.

Not his mother, but his dependence on his

mother, his position in this his home as his mother's tame house-trained cat.

And at length, just in time, and, as Algernon himself realized, only just in time, to save his soul alive, dear old Auntie Smithers died. Died, it seemed, that he might live.

For that smothered but smouldering spark of something good and fine—that glimmer of divine discontent that had made him ashamed of being what he was—burst into feeble but authentic flame, and Algernon, being then of age, of sound if warped mind, and fair if fluctuating health, did of his own effort and good courage, break away from maternal bondage and take flight to the house in Kensington that he had inherited complete.

And thither promptly his mother followed him.

Naturally and rightly, as every mother will agree, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe declared that it was as much her duty as her joy to investigate; to inspect; to "go through" everything; to replenish; and above all to interview and examine the elderly housekeeper, cook, parlour-maid, housemaid and kitchen-maid; and to reassure herself that these were not five foolish virgins who would leave the lamps untrimmed and the beds unaired.

Having selected the room which was to be

her own, and to be known thenceforth and for ever as Mother's Room, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe settled down to this most congenial and useful work, and did it thoroughly.

Indeed, it was not until well-nigh three months had passed that she listened to the voice, growing ever more clamorous in her bosom, and telling her that her parish and her Clarence were both suffering neglect—and possibly getting out of hand and into mischief.

CHAPTER III

IT was, of course, with considerable and natural misgiving that Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe at length abandoned her offspring, not only to the ministrations of the five wise virgins, elderly and virtuous, each *senex et horrida*, but also to the temptations, innumerable as terrible, of life in what Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe termed the Modern Babylon.

It was with a sense of having done at any rate something, if not much, toward safeguarding her son, that she paid yet another visit to Doctor John Desart and asked him if he would be so good as periodically to interview Algernon and report to her upon his physical condition.

The doctor had acquiesced with some alacrity, but had again tarnished his own image in the mind of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe by informing her that it was upon Algernon's mental condition that he would report, inasmuch as the greater contained the less.

"Mental condition, my good man?" had Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe exclaimed, startled from

her best manners into her second best, by the doctor's phraseology and attitude.

"You talk as though the poor boy were an idiot."

"Oh, we're all a little insane on some points," replied John Desart. "Some of us more insane in fewer ways, and others of us less insane in more ways."

"My son *insane*?" cried Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. "*My* son?"

"No, I didn't say he was insane, in the lay sense of the word," replied John Desart.

"But he has a long way to go before he has a sane, healthy, normal outlook on life. And now is his real chance to make a start; the start that was aborted at Preparatory School, Public School and the University . . . Once again, my dear Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, I do beg of you, with all the earnestness and seriousness of which I am capable, to let him alone now, and give him a fair chance. *Let him alone.*"

"And now that he has this splendid and wonderful chance as you call it?" said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe with some bitterness, "Now that he is safely beyond the dangerous and poisonous and destructive influence of his own mother, what special and particular advice do you propose to give him?"

"Oh, all sorts," smiled the doctor. "He has got to have a job, a game, a hobby, a

circle of friends, and more especially and particularly—a . . ."

John Desart cut himself short. He must not go too fast with this woman, if her son were to be rescued from the results of her selfishness and possessiveness, and from her love of interfering, "bossing," arranging, and personally conducting the lives of other people.

"I expect he plays a great game of croquet, and a little pat-ball tennis," he continued. "I suppose it's too late for him to take up cricket, football, hockey, boxing . . ."

"*Boxing?*" interrupted Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, and put a world of expression into the word.

"Well, fencing, then. Now that would be a splendid thing for him. Magnificent physical exercise, splendid for mental quickness, and as helpful in making a man of him as anything could possibly be."

Algernon with a sword in his hand!

"He can swim, Doctor," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, proudly and a little pathetically.

"Oh, splendid! . . . How did that happen?"

"An old bathing-woman taught him at Bognor. We used to go there every year. An excellent creature of irreproachable moral standards."

"The cold sea-water," murmured the doctor, reaching for pen and case-sheet, and as he wrote, added, "Nothing like it for the morals."

"How often do you want him to come to you, Doctor?"

"Just whenever he likes. As often as he likes. And once a week, whether he likes it or not."

"And you will communicate with me, at once, if there is anything you think I should know, or if he needs me?"

"I'll certainly write and let you know the moment I think he needs you," replied the doctor in a toneless voice, and added, as he eyed the arrogant face of his majestic visitor:

"Always provided that you do not assume that he needs you until I write and say so . . . Good-bye, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe . . . Shall I write the prescription down?" he smiled.

"Write what prescription down, Doctor?"

"'*Leave him alone*,'" and quickly John Desart opened the door.

§ 2

Algernon, as instructed by his mother, who wrote to him daily, made an appointment with Doctor Desart, thereafter visiting him weekly.

And John Desart did his able best to corrupt Algernon Dashwood Coxe and lead him from the straight and narrow path of virtuous idleness, innocuous worthlessness, false values, and microscopic futile ambitions.

Manfully he strove to enlarge the young man's horizons, to broaden his mind, to stiffen

his backbone, to instil into him a measure of self-reliance, independence and initiative.

In the good soil of Algernon's mind, he delved and sowed, and, for three months, he kept him from contact with his mother, and in as close contact as he could achieve with a circle of young people—including his own son and daughter—who were interested in art, the drama, literature, games, and life in general.

Algernon they at first found "sticky," priggish, pompous, ignorant and incredibly inept at games.

However, at the doctor's request, they regarded the attempt at Algernon's salvation as a good deed, though with little hope of ever really making him a "good scout."

"Long John, my lad," said Miss Jean Desart, aged nineteen, to her father, one morning at breakfast, after a few days' experience of the hapless and helpless young man, "Our Algernon is a sad piece of work. A Great Pure Earnest Prig. He really is God's Good Man."

"Oh, no. He is his mother's good man. So would you have been in his circumstances, my lass," replied the doctor. "Algernon's good stuff."

"It's been out in the rain all night then, I should think, for he's positively the wettest thing on dry land," replied the young lady. "But I love him dearly. He's so humble and sweet, really. And so genuinely a gentleman—

a rare and refreshing old fruit, these days. . . . He tells me that he now has a great, yea, a consuming, ambition in life. . . . It is to grow daily more and more like *you*, John! I told him he might do worse—oh, a lot worse. . . ." And the young lady kissed her father lightly, *en passant*, upon what she called his bald spot and he the " double-crown " of his head.

Long John Desart's children were very kind to their father, though firm, and considered that, on the whole, they had brought him up to be a credit to them.

§ 3

And at length the day arrived to which Doctor Desart had long looked forward—the day on which he felt he might, in fairness to an unknown woman, broach the subject which had for long been at the back of his mind, the subject of the beginning of the end of Algernon's long and tedious " cure."

" How old are you, by the way? " he asked him, at the conclusion of this momentous interview.

" Twenty-four," was the reply.

" Ever think about marriage? " enquired the doctor.

Algernon blushed.

" No," he said, and his nervous laugh was almost a giggle.

"Who'd marry *me?*" he asked deprecatingly.

"Well, hundreds of nice women would marry a couple of thousand a year and a comfortable house, Algernon, but we don't want one of that sort. We want somebody who'd marry Algernon for Algernon's sake, eh? Look here, my boy, you've got to fall in love."

"Yes, sir."

"And you've got to fall in love with a girl who'll fall in love with you."

"Yes, sir."

"And you've got to marry."

"Yes, sir."

"Oh, for God's sake, don't go on saying 'Yes, sir,'" snarled the doctor. "I'm not telling you to get your hair cut, or to take a taxi to Waterloo, am I?"

"No, sir."

"Wouldn't you *like* to fall in love with a nice girl and marry her, and have her in your house for a companion? Someone to talk to and play with and squabble with; someone to work for, and think for, and take care of?"

"Yes, sir. But no-one would marry *me!*"

"Wouldn't you like to have a son to romp with, and cuddle and carry up to bed on your shoulder? Someone to plan for, and work for and live for?"

"Yes, sir. But no-one would marry me."

The doctor's hand closed upon a heavy jade paper-weight, as he looked at Algernon.

He sighed.

The best Harley Street physicians do not throw paper-weights at their patients. Not even jade ones.

"Now look here," he said. "New prescription. Fierce wolf named Algernon Coxe now roams about in well-cut sheep's clothing seeking whom he may devour. When he's found a tender lamb, he's to bring it to me for inspection."

"Who'd marry *me*?" said Algernon again.

"Any nice girl," replied John Desart encouragingly, and with a rather forced smile of bright optimism.

"And would it be quite fair to her?" asked Algernon. "Seeing that I'm such a . . . such a . . ."

"Most certainly," replied the doctor. "She'll see a good deal of you first, of course. Make up her mind, and accept you. Marry you with her eyes open—knowing all about you before she does so . . . Oh, trust me, my son; I'll tell her what sort of a dud and a scoundrel you are. She'll marry you all-right. Live happy ever afterwards, too."

"Jean's seen a good deal of me, sir," observed Algernon. "I think I know her better than any other girl. I've only met a few . . .

She's a very nice girl . . . And she's always been very kind to me," he added meditatively.

" Perhaps she would marry me if I asked her," and he looked enquiringly at the doctor.

John Desart, distinguished, popular and famous physician, was not easily, or often, taken aback. He sat bolt upright in his chair, and stared hard at the apparently guileless face of the young man in front of him.

Was this a young fool, or a young knave?

Gradually his face softened, as a wry smile wreathed about his firm lips.

Hoist with his own petard!

Petard? But nothing had been further from his thoughts than " hoisting " anybody.

Surely there must be thousands of nice girls to whom marriage with Algernon Coxe would be a career?

A suitable career. Far better than wage-earning in some uncongenial and inappropriate capacity. Infinitely better than living and dying unfulfilled—just one more of the millions of " superfluous " women.

Nothing of a petard or bomb-shell about it at all . . . A thoroughly nice fellow without an atom of vice in his make-up.

He had almost said, " Not a redeeming vice in his character." . . . An excellent chap.

But Jean . . . His daughter Jean!

And what about somebody else's daughter Jean?

Well, that would be somebody else's look-out.

"No, Algernon," he said slowly and thoughtfully. "Not Jean. It wouldn't be suitable. Not quite the type for you. No. I shouldn't ask Jean."

"No, sir," said Algernon, obediently.

"No, my boy. You go off on this jaunt, as I advised. Have a month's absolute change and get all the fresh air, sunshine, sea-bathing, milk, cream, walking and sun-bathing that you can.

"Start from this Polporth Cove that Jean talks about, when you've had enough of it, and walk right round the coast of Cornwall. That would make a glorious holiday, and just what you want.

"Good-bye. Come and see me when you get back, and mind you're as hard as nails and as brown as a berry. Good-bye . . ."

§ 4

And so Algernon Coxe had gone to Polporth Cove, the place recommended to him by Doctor Desart's children, and had there met Giovanna Blayton, fallen desperately in love with her, as she had done with him, and had carried out Doctor Desart's latest prescription and found a

wife—or rather, a lady most ready and willing to become his wife.

The weeks that Algernon Coxe spent at Polporth Cove with Giovanna Blayton, albeit not of wholly unclouded joy, were by far the happiest of his life, and the letters that he wrote on the subject of his engagement were positively lyrical. They showed forth, as did his whole demeanour, bearing and face, the great change wrought in him by the alchemy of love.

John Desart wrote that he was delighted beyond measure, and that Algernon was to bring his fiancée straight to Harley Street when they left Polporth Cove, that he might congratulate them both.

"If she's the right sort of girl, our Algernon is made," he said to his daughter Jean.

"Saved . . . Redeemed . . . And if she doesn't stand up to his mother, and tell her fairly plainly that now her day is over, so far as bossing the wretched Algernon is concerned, it won't be for want of my prompting."

"Long John, my treasure, the late Mr. Machiavelli has nothing on you," replied Miss Jean Desart. "But suppose she's the wrong sort of girl?"

"Then I shall tell Algernon not to marry her," was the reply.

"And he'll say 'Yes, Doctor,'" observed Miss Desart, "and start afresh . . . Daddy,

why did you come between me and Algernon, my first, and probably last, suitor?"

"Because I want Algernon to marry a nice girl," was the doctor's reply.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe wrote that she was more astonished than she could say, at receiving Algernon's news, and, as words failed her, she would say nothing, except that the pictures painted by James Augustus Blayton, R.A., were not the kind of pictures that would be hung on the walls of Melfont Parva Vicarage, and that Algernon was to bring Miss Blayton to see her instantly—by the very next train, in fact.

Algernon replied that Miss Blayton was going to her flat in London shortly, as her father was going back to Italy, and that she would be delighted to come down to Melfont Parva at the very earliest opportunity.

Sensing a hint of disobedience, or rather a lack of instantaneousness in obedience, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe frowned as she read her son's reply, and her compressed lips ruled a very straight line between her high-bridged nose and firm, handsome chin.

Engaged to be married was he? And without consulting his mother! Without a single word to his mother! Engaged to be married!

Perhaps.

CHAPTER IV

ALGERNON COXE and Giovanna Blayton travelled to London together, and Algernon, having seen his fiancée to her flat, went to his house and thence promptly telephoned to Doctor Desart's secretary to make an appointment for the morrow.

It was his intention to get the doctor's endorsement and approval, both of his action and his Giovanna, and to go, armed with this endorsement and approval, to Melfont Parva Vicarage, straight from the doctor's house.

With Giovanna Blayton, John Desart was delighted, and declared that already he saw a far greater improvement in Algernon than was to be accounted for by fresh air, sunshine, sea-bathing and change. He was more alert, more animated, more purposeful, more disposed to have an opinion of his own, and to maintain it for a few seconds, if opposed.

After talking with the young people for a generous twenty minutes, he bade Algernon go and stand outside the door, as he had so often

done before, or, if he preferred it, find his way back to the waiting-room, for he himself wanted to talk with Giovanna alone.

"Now, my dear," he said, as the door closed, "I've been trying to save this boy for nearly twenty years."

"Save him, Doctor? From what?"

"From his mother."

"A bad woman?"

"No, a good one. Blameless; virtuous beyond telling; but she very nearly succeeded in making an equally blameless and virtuous old woman out of Algernon.

"Painlessly extracted his will and replaced it by her own. Brought him up by hand . . . on pap . . . with a spoon . . . of which she kept tight hold. Poor boy was never allowed to have a thought or a wish or an idea of his own. I doubt if he was allowed to do up his own buttons until he was twenty-one. The woman seems to be thoroughly uncomfortable when the boy is out of her sight, and far from comfortable when he is in sight. . . . It would have been very bad indeed for a daughter, an only girl —but for a boy! . . . But poor Algernon has never been a boy—never had a chance. . . . But now he has one, at last.

"*You*'re his chance. You can make a fine man and a splendid husband out of Algernon, but you've got to do a difficult thing. You've

got to put his mother in her place and not take her place yourself. You understand ? "

" No," said Giovanna, frankly.

The doctor eyed the very beautiful girl who sat in the low arm-chair before him, nervously buttoning and unbuttoning her glove. He saw not only beauty but strength, sensibility, passion and power expressed by the firm chin, the great eyes, the full lips, the nostrils, the forehead . . . Yes, this girl would do—if she'd play her part.

" Do you really love Algernon ? " he asked, as he watched her, his head resting on his hand, his pencil gently tapping the blotter in front of him.

" Yes," replied Giovanna.

" Much ? " asked the doctor, his keen strong face looking gentle, fatherly and kind, with the smile that Jean Desart adored.

" Much ? " echoed Giovanna. " I absolutely worship him. He is far, far more to me than life. He is the dearest, gentlest, most unselfish and pathetic creature I have ever met. And if ever in this world there was a *gentleman*, with a truly gentle soul and nature. . . . Love him ! Much ? "

And the girl's expression and quiet laugh told the doctor more than her words.

He nodded his head and rose to his feet.

" Look here, my dear," he said. " What I meant was this. There's been nothing in the world wrong with Algernon but too much good

mother. See that he doesn't have too much in the future. And don't you be a mother to him yourself. Be a wife, and make him be your husband, not your son.

" He'll never quarrel with his mother, and I don't want him to do so, but you must get him out from under her thumb. Don't spoil him. Make him spoil you—that will do him a lot of good. Don't think for him—make him think for himself and for you. You're a capable self-reliant girl with a will of your own. Hide it.

" Pretend to be a fluffy ass, and when you've decided that any course of action is the best one, lead Algernon to see that it is, and then encourage him to insist that it is. Make him think he's master in his own house, and a devil of a fellow at having his own way. See? "

The girl smiled.

" I think Algernon's perfect, Doctor," she said. " But I'm quite prepared to find his mother imperfect.

" And to find that she finds me something considerably worse than imperfect," she added. " Thank you so much, Doctor, for your kindness to Algernon."

" Well, now, it's up to you, my dear. You are to be his first wife and not his second mother, and if ever you come and tell me that Algernon occasionally beats you, I shall say *' Splendid ! '* "

Giovanna Blayton rose to go, and, ignoring the hand extended by the bowing doctor, impulsively placed her hands upon his shoulders, raised herself on tiptoe and kissed him on the chin.

"Good Lord!" cried the startled doctor, and patted her heavily on the back as he opened the door.

§ 2

The visit to Melfont Parva Vicarage was not a success. It was, in fact, a complete, hopeless and utter failure, for Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had intended it to be so, and Giovanna cared nothing, either way. Jimmy was going to have a wife, henceforth, instead of a mother, as that kind doctor had urged.

Giovanna's first and last meeting with Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe began coldly and ended distinctly hotly. It began at tea-time in a drawing-room in which one lady smelt tobacco-smoke with extreme distaste and the other smelt green-house with distaste as extreme.

It ended at midnight on a landing when one lady smelt vicious misconduct and the other smelt a pruriently putrid nasty mind.

It had lasted but from tea-time till breakfast instead of for the proposed week, and the young people, miserable, angry with each other and with themselves, returned to London, Giovanna

to her flat and Algernon to his house, in a mutual spirit of coldness amounting almost to hostility.

§ 3

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe frequently assured her husband, and indeed other people, that she was never one to interfere. With even greater emphasis than usual she re-affirmed this theory on the day of Giovanna's departure from Melfont Parva Vicarage.

"As you are well aware, Clarence," she said to her husband as they sat at their belated breakfast in the cheerful, sunny room, now purged and purified of Giovanna's cigarette-smoke and presence, "I am not one to interfere."

The Reverend Clarence gazed upon the face of his wife and there was a faint movement upon the surface of the black mass that was his moustache, beard and whiskers, a movement slightly suggestive of that of the corn-field which stirs at the whisper of the breeze unseen. Whether the movement indicated that the Reverend Clarence had smiled, grinned, sneered or snarled, none might know.

"I never interfere in other people's affairs, and I would be the last woman in the world to imagine anything so foolish as that a mother can choose a wife for her son . . . Marriages are made in Heaven."

The Reverend Clarence looked as though he might be thinking back, and estimating Heaven's responsibility in his own case.

"No," repeated Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, "I never interfere . . ." and added a moment later:

"I would sooner see Algernon in his grave than married to that deplorable young . . . young . . . young . . ."

"Girl," suggested the Reverend Clarence.

"Sooner see him in his grave," re-affirmed his wife.

"One rarely does see people in their graves," mused the Vicar.

"An absolutely impossible person. Absolutely immoral or non-moral. Common and unclean . . . Night-clubs . . . Sitting in the nude for a gang of artists . . . Her face and figure portrayed and hanging in scores of public salons . . . shops . . . picture galleries . . . all over the place. The girl is cheap, second-hand, soiled goods . . . And if she thinks she is really going to marry my son, she never made a bigger mistake in all her mistaken life.

"I never interfere, as you know," she continued—and again it was as though a spirit moved upon the face of the whiskers, if not actually upon the face of the Reverend Clarence, which remained expressionless—"but this engagement must be broken off at once. It is

unthinkable. She would drag him down. It is as much our duty to save him as it would be if he were drowning before our very eyes. And not only must he be saved, but *placed* in safety."

The Reverend Clarence again lifted his eyes from his plate and regarded the face of his wife and mistress—or, to avoid ambiguity—master.

"No mother should rush in where angels might fear to tread, and so far invade the privacy of her son's soul as to interfere . . . to say whom he shall, or shall not marry . . . actually to choose him a wife. But she can *guide* his choice . . . Oh, yes, she can guide his choice."

Beneath the screen and defence of his magnificent moustache and beard, the muscles of the face of the Reverend Clarence moved in some mysterious way his wonder to repress.

"Agatha Sharp," he commented, apparently to himself.

§ 4

Agatha Sharp was a born Disciple, and few leaders have had a more convinced, faithful or devoted disciple than had Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe in Agatha, from the time when this exceedingly wealthy orphan had, after a very tragic experience, decided that she did not like men and would never, never marry.

Agatha, beside being a born Disciple, was fast developing into a born virgin, or born old-maid ; one of those good women whose sole interest in life is parochial, and who so frequently develop a passionate devotion for another woman.

The parish of St. Jude's provided her with work, and the church of St. Jude's with recreation—the mending of cassocks and hassocks, the arranging of flowers and other such useful and ornamental occupation, and Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe provided her with an outlet for her strong and repressed emotions and desires.

Agatha Sharp had recently taken a severely-furnished cottage-*de-luxe*, the garden of which adjoined that of the Vicarage. It was thus easy for her to pass from her actual to her spiritual home whenever her beloved and revered Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe required her services, or her faithful Disciple imagined she might do so.

And on this same morning, Agatha Sharp did so pass from her garden to that of her adored friend and, a few minutes later, comfortably ensconced in a wicker arm-chair upon the lawn, beneath the great cedar of Lebanon, was hearing all about it : and not only all about it, but all about what Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had thought about it, and had said about it to her husband, her son and the " young woman " herself.

Agatha Sharp was a good listener and enjoyed this signal mark of confidence. She became an

even better listener, and enjoyed yet more deeply the confidence when it began slowly to dawn upon her not too perceptive mind that her mother-in-spirit was conceivably suggesting the possibility of desiring tentatively to visualize herself as Agatha's mother-in-law in the flesh.

Agatha was dumbfounded when this painfully novel, rather terrible, scorchingly brilliant, idea shed its first ray upon the placid levels of her gentle mind; and when it rose full and clear above her mental horizon, suffusing with curious warmth and illuminating with strange new light her whole soul and being, she was inclined to be dazzled by it.

"But I don't want you to worry on my account, dearest Agatha," begged Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, mistaking the source of her disciple's apparent emotion; "I can bear it, or rather I should say I will *not* bear it; I will not have it. As I said to his father at breakfast this morning, I would see my son in his grave rather than married to a girl who would dare to speak to me as she did, who would dare to indulge her filthy vices in my very house. Doubtless Algernon will be a little sore at first, a little annoyed and disappointed if his new toy is taken from him—for that's exactly what this girl is, a toy. She is a typical specimen of the toy-type, as distinct from the wife-type, and Algernon shall marry a *wife*."

And here the speaker placed her large and capable hand upon the small incapable one that rested on the arm of her chair.

"Since Algernon wishes to marry," she continued, "he shall do so. But though I was never one to interfere, neither am I the sort of mother that would sit idly by, and watch her only son rush headlong to destruction."

A pregnant silence ensued, a silence scarcely broken by the sound of Agatha's quickened breathing.

"Yes, destruction," affirmed Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe with explosive suddenness, "mind, body and soul."

"And pocket," she added, and sat grim-lipped gazing into space and the future—a future she would change in spite of Fate itself.

"Algernon cannot truly love a woman of that sort," said Agatha. "He is your son . . . Well bred . . . Brought up by you, at home, he must be fastidious . . . a gentleman . . . Surely he could only love a woman of his own class and kind . . . a lady, a gentlewoman . . ."

"*Love*, dear child?" was the indignant reply. "There's absolutely nothing whatsoever of *love* in this deplorable affair.

"A mere ephemeral infatuation, a disgraceful entanglement. Yes, infatuation is the kindest

and most charitable word that one can possibly use . . . Love indeed! *Sex*.

"*Sex* and nothing else. Sickening and disgusting. Love? Faugh! A profanation of the word. When a man loves, he looks up, not down . . . We needs must love the highest when we see it, my dear Agatha."

Another pregnant silence.

"Agatha, my dear," repeated Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, impressively. "We needs must love the highest when we see it," and again Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe pressed the girl's hand.

And as she turned her gentle eyes, large, placid and somewhat suggestive of the mild and kindly cow, to gaze upon the face of her second mother, Agatha all but gasped.

With opening lips—indeed with open mouth—she stared, half-comprehending, at her strong-minded friend.

"We needs must love the highest when we see it," said that lady for the third time, and gently and encouragingly patted the hand of Agatha as she spoke.

"The best way of driving something out, and keeping it out, is to put something else in its place," she continued, and enlarged upon her platitude.

"Perfect love casteth out fear and assuredly it casteth out infatuation . . ."

And for something less than a quarter of an

hour, musing aloud, she harped upon her one-stringed theme.

Finally:

"No man who has had an upbringing such as that of my son could, when it came to the point in choosing a wife, hesitate for one second between an abandoned creature, such as that, and a pure sweet beautiful and well-born woman of his own class."

And Agatha felt the strong grip of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's hand clasping and squeezing her own with utmost significance.

Pausing for a moment in her monologue, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe became aware that Agatha was speaking, or trying to speak.

"You were saying, dear?" she asked with the faint asperity that was apt to tinge her voice when she was interrupted in the midst, or indeed at the end, of a rounded period.

"Shall I tell you something?" whispered Agatha. "There's something I should like to tell you, dearest Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. I think it would . . . it would . . . interest you a little."

"Yes, what is it, dear?" Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe humoured the girl.

"I'm so attracted to Algernon. When I first saw him, months ago, I thought what a nice man he looked, so different from that dreadful Delval who nearly ruined my life. I do like him very much."

"But you've never spoken to him, my dear. I didn't know you'd even seen him. He's been away nearly all the time, since you came to Melfont Parva."

"Oh, I've seen him twice—in Church. And once he passed me in Love Lane and raised his hat and gave me such a pleasant smile. He had noticed me in the choir, I suppose, and remembered me. Meeting me suddenly, he must have thought he knew my face. Yes, such a pleasant smile . . . Such nice teeth . . . Do you know, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, I thought about him quite a lot afterwards."

Again the large strong hand patted the small weak one.

"And now to think that he has given his heart to this Scarlet Woman . . . Quite a blow."

And Agatha tittered self-consciously.

"Not given it, Agatha, lent it. Or scarcely that.

"Say rather, that the young woman, seeing it was ownerless, so to speak, had the brazen audacity and impudence to pick it up. No, not given it. Lent it, at the most . . . And believe me, it shall be returned . . . Returned undamaged . . . And quickly, too. I'll see to that. Oh, yes, trust me to see to that.

"Every young man passes through a phase of this sort—like measles and whooping-cough.

And, as with these other infantile and puerile diseases, everything depends on the nursing, my dear Agatha. I will nurse him through this mental and moral disease as I've done through the physical ones."

Another of the pregnant silences that punctuated this portentous and fateful conversation.

"Now, suppose you come to dinner on—let us say Saturday week, dearest Agatha," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe at length. "Yes, and bring your songs and music. Algernon is very fond of music—devoted to it. He will accompany you."

And, turning, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe took Agatha's face between her hands, and with deepest significance, kissed Agatha on the mouth.

"Oh, oh, *dearest* Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," gasped Agatha.

Algernon duly accompanied Agatha, though for a briefer space than his masterful mother had intended.

CHAPTER V

IF no man can serve two masters, how many can serve two mistresses? Whatever their numbers, Algernon Coxe was not of them.

Bravely he tried, horribly he suffered, miserably he weakened and ignobly he failed.

"Give me a boy until he is seven years of age and I will make him mine for life," said the philosopher priest.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had had Algernon for thrice that time and he was hers for life, her will was his will, her ways were his ways, and those who were not her people should not be his people.

Within the week, she followed him to London, installed herself in Mother's Room, and set to work—with all the strength of her strong will, all the power of her powerful character, and all the might of her mighty advantage as the mother whom he had never dared to disobey. Set herself to work to defeat Giovanna, to belittle her natural and acquired accomplishments, to blacken her character, and to befoul her image in the mind of her son.

Before long, home was an unhappy place where life was rendered unbearable by the presence of a cold, angry and reproachful mother who strove to tear him from his sweetheart and his refuge.

Giovanna's flat was gradually becoming an unhappy place where life was rendered unbearable by the presence of a cold, angry and reproachful sweetheart who strove to tear him from his mother.

In pursuance, to the best of her ability, of the policy and line of conduct advised by Doctor Desart, Giovanna wrestled continuously with her lover's complex, his *idée fixe*, his terrible subjection to his mother's will and word.

To any other than a doctor or a loving woman, this subjection would have been ridiculous, childish, incredible, disgraceful.

To Giovanna it was pitiable, pathetic and terrible.

Within the space of a few weeks, almost the whole time of each of their daily meetings was devoted to arguments that degenerated into wranglings which ended with the *impasse*:

"I am your fiancée and shall soon be your wife. You chose me. You love me. Whom you marry is your business, not hers . . ."

"I am her son. I owe everything to her. I cannot disobey and defy her. I have never

done such a thing in my life! . . . She is my mother. It would break her heart . . ."

Gradually Giovanna began to feel that her position was weakening, that she was slipping, and that Algernon was being drawn, as by this stronger magnet, back into the bondage of obedience to his mother.

Time after time, he had left her with a promise that he would "speak to his mother to-night," re-affirm the fact of his betrothal, definitely announce the date of his marriage, and firmly adhere to what he said.

Time after time, he had returned to her with the promise unfulfilled, and with the miserable confession that he had failed, for his mother had "refused to hear a word," and had flatly declined to consent to the marriage, either now, soon, later, or at any time whatsoever.

And gradually Giovanna began to feel that the time approached when she must stake everything on a single throw and say:

"Choose between your mother and me, once and for all. Choose now, or never come here again. Fix a date for our wedding or break off our engagement, and I will never see you any more."

But she was afraid.

If she could get Algernon to come and live in her flat for a few days; keep him right away from his mother; send, one day, for a priest, and say suddenly to Algernon:

"Let's be married now, here, at once," she would win.

As things were, she was afraid; for it was quite possible—nay, sometimes it seemed quite probable—that if compelled to choose, he would choose his mother.

When with Giovanna, he could be himself, have a soul of his own, and say "Yes, Giovanna." When with his mother, he could but be what his mother had made him, and say "No, Mother."

So Giovanna put off what might be the evil day, though feeling that the longer things went on as they were, the greater was the chance of the battle being won by the big battalions of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's power and opportunity.

Had she not quarter of a century's start, and had she not got Algernon there in the house all day and night, as against Giovanna's hour or two?

So Giovanna's simple mind and subtle brain turned to thoughts of stratagems and tricks. She pondered ways and means, and she considered schemes.

Since she had overcome Algernon's absurd scruples against visiting her at her flat—as all her other friends did—might she not take steps to bind herself to him in such a way that none but the meanest and vilest cur could, even for a moment, contemplate the severance of the bond?

That would defeat his abominable mother.

Since she gave Giovanna the credit for being a vicious hussy who had led Algernon astray, why not lead him "astray" to his salvation?

Would Doctor Desart approve of that?

She would go and ask him frankly, and whether he approved or not, she would do it if it were necessary; if it were her last hope and resource.

And suppose Algernon failed her then, and did break the bonds wherewith she had striven to bind him?

She would risk it, for his sake and her own happiness.

Meanwhile, what about jealousy—one of the strongest of all emotions and most potent of the springs of human action?

If Algernon could be made jealous, he might act.

Jealousy might prove stronger than this morbid filial love that kept him a supine slave devoid of will-power. But if real love, the love of a man for a maid had failed, could jealousy succeed?

It might.

Certainly the two together might triumph; love and jealousy against filial affection and dependence.

She would try it.

Yes, she would try the effect of jealousy first

—and as Giovanna thought of jealousy, she thought by association of ideas, of Boris Goudroff, the Polish or Russian artist, and felt a little thrill as she did so, a sensation born of mixed feelings of disgust and admiration, fear and strong attraction.

She must take Algernon to that haunt of Boris and his kind, the *Hors Concours* night-club, known to its English habitués as *The Green Haddock*. Boris would attempt to make love to her, of course, and as a matter of course.

Thereafter Algernon should occasionally find him in the flat.

Yes, if a dose of jealousy were to be administered, Boris was most remarkably the appropriate and suitable instrument.

But she must be careful, very careful indeed —for while Boris was something of an unknown quantity, there was not much unknown about either the quantity or the quality of his strength, violence, savagery and colossal conceit and egoism—the last amounting practically to a mental disease.

Yes—this would crave wary walking; but Giovanna was prepared to run far greater risks than this, in order to save her lover and herself, to save her lover for herself.

Boris could take care of himself and look out for himself.

And when had Boris ever considered anybody,

or spared anybody in pursuit of his own selfish ends, gratifications and pleasures?

She could manage Boris all right; and, surely, he grasped, by this time, the fact that not even his magnificent strength of body and mind, the power and force of his art, and his enormous vitality, violence, and general overwhelmingness, had availed to make her love him?

Had he been less egotistical, less selfish, less mean and vain and brutal and beastly . . . had there been no Algernon Coxe in this rather unsatisfactory world, Boris might have had his way.

Yes, she could manage Boris and make him "behave," even if she did appear to give him a little encouragement, and to lead him on, for a time.

In sheer gratitude alone, for the way in which she had helped him, he would forgive her if she raised him up a little and then cast him down; used him and made a convenience of him.

Had she not given him money, quite often, when he was literally starving; and, far more than that, had she not sat for him when he could not possibly afford a model; sat for him as Andromeda, and enabled him to paint the picture that had brought him some fame and some money?

Yes, Boris Goudroff should be useful to her now in return, whether he liked it or not.

§ 2

The *Hors Concours*, known to the nicer-minded of its English and American clientèle as *The Green Haddock* and to its less nice-minded as something else, a night-club haunted by the same inevitable types as adorn other such sad places, was to some extent redeemed from the usual dead level of inane and dreary dullness, by the patronage of a curious clique of artists, art-students and those who serve the servants of the Arts.

Recognized artists and their easily-recognized models; art-students working (or not working) at the Slade, the Royal Academy Schools or the St. John's Wood School of Art; musicians, composers, a sculptor or two, professional dancers, chorus-girls, some actors and a few alleged actresses; queer specimens strayed, stolen or flung from the more orthodox ranks of their brethren, forgathered at *The Green Haddock* and with a certain liveliness, wit and intelligence, leavened the lump of heavy-eyed, weary pursuers of the pleasure that apparently they never overtook.

When not in Cornwall or Italy, James Augustus Blayton honoured this slightly murky pool of queer fish, and was the recognized *doyen* of its artistic clique.

Those there were, even here, who called him

James Disgust-us Blayton, and either disliked or affected to dislike, the tone of his conversation, the savour of his jokes. And—when he had not only looked upon, but dined upon and supped upon, the wine when it is red—more particularly his conduct with, or toward, the ladies who accompanied him, accompanied his friends, or attended the Club unaccompanied.

Once or twice he had made even the management uneasy, and the management was a cosmopolitan rascal who had successively made Paris, Vienna and Berlin too hot for his comfort.

But since he had introduced Giovanna to the club, and fallen into the habit of bringing her there, Blayton had improved, and had earned credit for knowing where to draw the line in the presence of his daughter.

For this place—albeit she regarded it with no great liking or admiration—Giovanna had no very marked distaste, inasmuch as the men and women she encountered there were very much of the type she had always met in her father's house.

Of this set, all were very emancipated and modern ; most of them quite harmless and well-meaning ; a few of them intensely respectable citizens striving desperately to be raffish and unshockable ; three or four were great souls encased in finer clay, pure and simple artists marked for

success and fame in their own branch of art; two or three were neither pure nor simple, nor were they artists, but just plain ordinary swine; and one or two were only redeemed from loathsomeness by a bright spark of the divine authentic fire of Genius.

Of these was Boris Goudroff, a gentleman of dubious nationality and Paris gutter birth, whose egotism enabled him firmly to believe and loudly to proclaim that anybody who supported him while he worked at his Art or rested and sought inspiration, was merely seizing the opportunity of a lifetime, and should be humbly grateful to Boris Goudroff for providing such an opportunity.

Boris found young women more receptive of this idea than other people, and more prone to recognize their opportunity of becoming benefactors, not merely of the noble Boris but of mankind in general and lovers of great Art in particular.

He, or rather she, who supported Boris while he painted a picture, or thought about painting one, deserved well, he said, of her generation and of generations yet unborn.

Yet, as a rule, his women supporters appeared to prefer that Boris should think well of them, and seemed singularly indifferent to the opinion of their generation, still less so to that of future ones.

But Boris did not think well of them, and did not for long conceal the fact.

He tolerated them as necessary evils, necessary only until the crassly stupid, blindly ignorant, and unbelievably soulless world awoke from its sottish slumber and realized Boris Goudroff—Boris Goudroff who should be hailed an Old Master while he was still alive—or rather as a Young Master greater than any of the Old.

He did not think well of them, because none of them was Giovanna Blayton; and he tolerated them as necessary evils because they were necessary to his existence and because they were in every way evil by comparison with the peerless Giovanna—who looked, as he often told her, like nothing but a *Picture by Boris Goudroff* come to life and escaped from its great gold frame or prison.

And a gold prison he would build for her when he was the most famous man alive, and as rich as he was famous; and, meanwhile, could she lend him a sovereign, for he never accepted anything less than gold.

§ 3

To *The Green Haddock*, one evening, Giovanna Blayton brought Algernon Coxe, in pursuance of her idea of trying to broaden his mind and make him more tolerant of those specimens of

his fellow man and woman who differed in all respects from himself and his mother.

Also had she an eye to the inception and furtherance of her foolish plot for making Algernon jealous, and so adding the stings of the scorpions of jealousy to those of the whips of desire and of the urgings of love.

It had not been an easy matter to persuade him to accompany her to this delectable resort, and she had been compelled to ask him whether he supposed that a Club, honoured by her father and visited by herself, was likely to be so inferior a place as to be unworthy of a visit from the future son-in-law of the one and husband of the other.

"We won't go at all after we are married, Jimmy darling," she had smiled.

"Er—no . . . No . . . That is if we . . ." he had replied falteringly and stopped.

Giovanna had thought it wiser to refrain from making him complete his sentence.

Had he been going to say "That is if we—ever *do* marry?" or merely "That is if we—don't both like the place very much."

Certainly this poor pathetic Jimmy must be made jealous. He must be "bucked up," aroused and energized; must be given the courage of his conviction that Giovanna was his true love and soul-mate, whether the magic potion were jealousy or passion—or else his

mother would win, and Jimmy would be lost indeed, and not only lost to Giovanna.

Poor darling weak Jimmy. How hard it was, and always would be, to avoid "mothering" him; and how slow and difficult a task to foster the growth of his dwarfed and stunted individuality, will and personality.

Algernon Coxe seated himself opposite to Giovanna at a little table beside the exiguous dancing-floor of the *Hors Concours*, and gazed around in wonder, if not alarm.

He found himself in a very large underground room, or hall, the walls of which were decorated with what are sometimes termed "conscientious nudes," but which had been rendered, by skilled hands, less conscientious and more conscious by casual adornment with here a garter, a sash, or a shoe, there a stocking, a hat, or what might be paradoxically termed a late-and-early garment of a date much more modern than that of its wearer.

From these curious and interesting mural decorations—frieze has perhaps too cold a suggestion to be appropriate—Jimmy's eye wandered to the long bar which occupied the whole of one end of the hall.

Here, dispensing little bread and much sack, was the fattest man on earth, who said that he confidently looked forward to being

also the fattest angel in Heaven or elsewhere.

One of the many interesting sights of this place was that of the huge short-fingered hands of the fat man, manipulating bottles, pouring drinks and mixing cocktails with not only the air but the skill of a great conjurer and greater juggler.

This man or human mound, Jimmy, fascinated, watched a while, much as a rabbit whose safety is guaranteed by a lioness, might watch a boa-constrictor at his fell work.

At length his eye strayed from this wonder and beheld others.

At a neighbouring table sat a sallow-faced blue-chinned individual, his head covered with a foreign-looking black felt hat which was not quite a sombrero, his neck swathed in a piece of black silk that was not quite a stock, his form enshrouded in a cloak that was not quite green with age, and his feet encased in cracked and lace-less patent shoes, whose pointed toes were not quite spikes.

With elbow on table and his head resting upon a rather grubby hand, he smoked curiously, and with a nice sense of technique appropriate to his general style and appearance ; for while the little finger of the supporting hand closed his right nostril, he exhaled smoke through the left.

Pondering this phenomenon, Jimmy, ignorant of physiology, wondered whether this accomplished man would perhaps later close both nostrils and exhale the smoke from his ears.

The gentleman had a companion, but not company, for the lady who sat with him at table did, like himself, stare unmoving and unmoved, into the empty cup of coffee-grounds and cigarette-stubs that graced the table before her.

Silent, still, blank-faced and sunk in gloom, they sat and sat and presumably enjoyed themselves.

At the next table a party of four enjoyed themselves also; but in a different manner, with loud laughter, harsh or shrill, and great outcry.

The men were in evening-dress, the ladies almost in night-dress. One man was rubicund, fat, with huge prominent eyes, walrus moustache, and spreading ears exfoliating at right angles to the plane of his cheeks.

He did not look as though possessed of intelligence, but was evidently endowed with the kindred gift of a keen sense of humour, inasmuch as he positively howled with laughter at every single remark of every one of his companions.

Laughter so loud, so long—indeed so unbrokenly continuous, struck Algernon as something of which one might possibly grow weary

as the hours dragged by; but he decided that, again, this might not be so, for one would probably become accustomed, immune, and unconscious, as of the plangent ticking of a raucous clock.

The other man was young, sly and sleek—sleek as a seal, and with a seal's large eyes and sharp intelligent look.

"Hair brushed back like a seal," mused Algernon. "Sharp white teeth like a seal. Would he snap and catch it if I threw him this piece of fish, I wonder? . . . The Walrus and the Seal . . . What a lot of people resemble animals! Which do I resemble? A rabbit, I suppose. And Giovanna a most lovely Persian kitten."

One of the partners of the Walrus and the Seal had caught sight of him and Giovanna and had drawn the attention of the party to them. Really they were unpardonably rude, for not only did they stare and snigger, but the other woman was distinctly heard to say:

"Oh, look what the cat's brought in. Jovanner's picked up the junest June Premier ever hatched in May," and the Seal to reply:

"No, that's not the *jeune premier*, it's the *ingénue* masquerading as one. Things are not always what they seem, and the cat did not fish it up from the bottom of the Well of Truth. More probably from some other kind."

Roars of laughter greeted this sally and mingled with that of the Walrus, which had never ceased.

To Algernon they were creatures as incomprehensible as they were objectionable, and he wondered that Giovanna should care to visit a place frequented by such people.

"Enjoying yourself, Jimmy darling?" she said at that moment.

"Oh, what else could one do in your company, Giovanna? . . . This is a queer place, isn't it?"

"We'll dance by and by, Jimmy."

"I still feel like an elephant when I try to dance, Giovanna," he demurred.

"Never mind, darling, you don't look in the least like an elephant . . . Dancing elephants are rather graceful, really."

What strange things Giovanna did say.

Hearing the sound of a violent smack and a loud squeal, Jimmy sprang round in time to realize that a gentleman, big, bald and bold, had smitten a lady's bare back with tremendous force, skill and resonance . . . but evidently his hand upon her was but in the way of kindness laid, for he shook and rolled with Bacchic laughter, and the lady's protest was more than half mechanical.

Doubtless he habitually did this when the spirit moved him, particularly cheap spirit in "double" measure.

Ere the surprised Algernon had time to turn away, the lady, a yellow-haired fat fairy, had caught his eye and, in exchange, poked out her tongue.

Algernon blushed and Giovanna laughed.

As he bent over his plate, in some confusion, he was almost knocked from his chair as a very small hairy old man, in faulty and maculate evening-dress, clasping a lady who might or might not have been his granddaughter, but who was much more than twice his size, fell, or was thrown by his partner, heavily against him.

"These hogs feedin' all over the dancin'-floor," growled the big girl and whirled her grandfather away.

As the couple gyrated, and over the head of her aged but active partner, she came face to face with the apologetic Algernon,

"Keep your dam' chair under proper control," she said, but softened her heavy curtness with a heavier wink.

Edging his chair a little farther from the undemarcated edge of the dancing-floor, Algernon came into slight but jarring contact with a lady sitting partly beside and partly behind him. She, an obvious French girl, with a fringe and at least one-of-everything direct from Paris, requested him with broadest Cockney accent, but the sweetest reasonableness, not to bloomin' well climb *all* over 'er—not until she'd finished

her blinkin' supper any'ow, and she 'adn't so much as lapped 'er blighted gravy yet.

Her unnecessary petition was cut short by her partner, with the words:

"My lovely one, ma Diane de Poictiers, ma Ninon de L'Enclos, ma Louise de la Vallière, ma Rose du Barri, ma Mademoiselle de Maintenon et de Montespan as well, ma Gabrielle d'Estrée, ma Princess Lointain, for God's sake, shut your darling mouth, for you're only tolerable when silent and then you are adorable. If you utter another word I'll . . ."

Happily or unhappily, the threat was uttered in a lower voice and lost to all but she whom it did concern.

"That's Belwardine, the black-and-white man, and his famous Belle Babette from Brixton."

"He looks white enough," said Algernon, and Giovanna gazed upon him once again in wonder.

Jimmy really was too sweet for words and almost too good to be true.

"An artist, my precious," she said. "Draws with black ink on white paper. Hence the name. And the girl, Gertie Plumb, is his model. He illustrates 'Our Paris Letter' in the *Scream*. Gertie is his Parisienne and he's got the rest of Paris in his studio."

"How dreadfully tired these poor waiters look," said the kindly Algernon, observing a

red-eyed pale-blue-faced vision of insomnia, who stood drooping near. "I'd like to send them all to Polporth Cove for a month."

"They'd die of boredom, darling, and the sunshine would kill them like germs. And how'd they earn the necessary for Mrs. Waiter and all the little Waiters? . . . And anyhow they're doing it for money, aren't they?"

"Yes . . . But what are all the others doing it for?"

"Pleasure, Jimmy."

"They say the English take their pleasures sadly. Some of these people seem to take them like medicine—or poison."

"Shall we dance?" asked Giovanna.

"Might we wait until there's a little less of a squash?" asked Algernon.

"That would mean waiting till to-morrow, darling," replied Giovanna. "But we'll look out for a suitable opening for a young couple."

And Algernon looked out, but not with any marked symptoms of enthusiasm.

Most of the dancing couples were normal and typical night-club habitués, varying in demeanour, largely on the part of the women, from hopeless, joyless weariness and boredom, to that, largely on the part of the men, of determined and conscious hilarity.

Here and there among them were people whose weird freakishness of appearance and

demeanour caused Algernon's wide eyes to open wider, and, concerning the *raison d'être* of some, he appealed to Giovanna for enlightenment.

"The man with side-whiskers, a fringe and sort of chignon, with the vast orange tie, or sash, round his neck, Jimmy? Oh, he—and anybody else like him, for that matter—is almost certainly either a failure in one of the Arts, or wishes to be mistaken for one."

"Wishes to be mistaken for a failure?"

"Yes, darling. Failure is the only true success."

"Eh?" said Jimmy, blankly.

"Paradox, darling. All great Truth is Paradox, and all great paradoxes true. If you can't sell a picture, it's complete and final proof that it is over the heads of the Philistines, or else a pearl cast before swine, or perhaps painted before the world is ready for it. It's always the world's fault if a book or picture or statue or opera or epic poem fails; never the fault of the thing itself."

"Oh," said Jimmy.

"The girl in the green sack, or rather half-sack—sounds like coals and coke, doesn't it—why, she 'made' *Purple Spots*."

"Oh? On what or whom?"

"*Purple Spots* is a book, darling. Lovely book. All spotty and purple."

"A failure?" asked Jimmy.

"Why, no, Jimmy. Nothing born in the purple can fail—'specially with spots on it. Oh, no, Melissa Proop isn't a failure, but, in spite of her success, her friends still love her and she is still welcome in the foulest circles."

"She's pretty, isn't she?" said Jimmy. "Sort of bloom on . . ."

"Yes," agreed Giovanna. "Sort of bloom on her like that on a grape or a peach—or the phosphorescence on rotten fish."

"Oh, Giovanna! Fish! . . ."

"Oh, Jimmy! . . . Nasty fishy muddy fish. Now she *would* carry all before her at Melfont Parva Vicarage.

"Carries a good deal before her, anywhere, innocent young thing," she added, and Jimmy changed the subject.

A large party entered the hall and proceeded to where three or four small tables had been joined together to form a large one.

"Oh, here's Daddy's band," said Giovanna. "I'll introduce you to some of them by and by. He sits at the head of the table and does Sir Oracle every Wednesday night when he's in town."

"By Jove! Who's the giant?" asked Jimmy.

"My most devoted admirer, darling, or should I say my late devoted admirer, now that you have come on the scene, Jimmy? He's your hated rival, darling."

"Do I hate him?" enquired Jimmy.

"He'll hate you, anyhow, my son," was the reply.

"He's Boris Goudroff, and a very coming man," she continued. "It would be a great investment to buy his pictures. He doesn't paint many, because he generally can't afford paints, brushes and canvas, much less models and a studio."

"What sort of pictures does he paint?" asked Jimmy, suppressing a yawn.

"Oh, corpses mostly—on battle-fields or gallows or mortuary slabs; maidens drowned in pools, and maidens who ought to be drowned in pools. He did a wonderful one of me as *Andromeda*."

Giovanna watched for a flush of anger or a look of disgust, chagrin or distaste, but failed to find on Algernon's placid face even so much as the faintest expression of annoyance.

"You know the story of Andromeda?" she asked, a little sharply.

"Oh, rather. Chained to a rock. Perseus slew the sea monster."

"Let's dance," she said, and launched and steered her lover among the queer fish that darted, glided, rolled and gyrated in the somewhat turbulent waters of this cavern of *The Green Haddock*.

When, a few minutes later—Jimmy still carefully counting in time with the band—they

passed the table reserved for the noisy party graced and ornamented by the presence of Boris Goudroff, a great arm shot out, and a huge hand, seizing Giovanna, pulled her and her partner, in a somewhat disorderly heap, down on to the wall-divan.

Scrambling to his feet, the indignant Algernon realized that it was the gigantic Boris Goudroff who had so unceremoniously gathered them unto himself.

"Soh, you pass me by, is it?" growled the artist. "Very nize. You could not see the leetle Boris, hein? Any peoples who cannot see ze leetle Boris, perhaps they feel him, hein? Perhaps he put his arm right round them and give them a hug that break both their leetle arms and all their leetle ribs—or perhaps he wring their leetle necks, hein? Now you dance with zis leetle Boris, and if you don' dance nize on your feet, he will dance with you sitting on his shoulder, hein?"

And springing to his feet, the giant literally whirled Giovanna from hers and plunged into the crowd.

Algernon remained seated on the plush divan.

What extraordinary friends Giovanna had!

§ 4

As they came out into the street, and Algernon thankfully inhaled deep draughts of the

clean sweet air, Boris Goudroff lifted up his mighty voice and bawled:

"Tahx-ee, Tahx-ee," in a sonorous and resounding bellow, and an answering hail from the near-by darkness preceded by a few seconds the arrival of a lurking taxi.

"I shall take you to home, Jo. Yes? Isn't it? No?" said Goudroff, opening the door of the taxi.

"Did you hear that, Jimmy?" smiled Giovanna. "Boris is offering to see me home."

"Oh, how awfully kind of him," replied Jimmy, cheerfully. "Er—if it isn't troubling him too much. I mean—er—if he's going in your direction."

Goudroff laughed loudly.

"I always goes in Jo's direction, isn't it, Jo? No?"

Giovanna stared at Algernon, her face hardening.

"Come along then, Boris," she said. "I'll give you a drink if you're good enough to deserve one . . . Good-night, Jimmy—or would you like to . . ."

"Oh, good-night, Giovanna, good-night. Thanks so much—er—I'll ring you up to-morrow."

"Good-night, Jimmy," said Giovanna, and got into the taxi, followed by Goudroff, who

promptly put his arm about her waist and kissed her passionately.

"I said, if you were good enough, Boris," she protested, endeavouring to remove the huge arm that encircled her.

"What, like these silly swines call me Borris Goodenough," he replied, tightening his clasp. "I say 'I am not Borris Goodenough, nor Borris Goudenov, nor Borris Goudroff, you damnfool ignorance, but *Boreece Goudroff*,' isn't it? Yes. And who's this leetle dog you call Jeemy? I take hold of that leetle dog's leg and I take hold of his head—and then I pull. See which come off first. I zink I pull 'is 'ead off, yes. No?"

"I'm afraid Jimmy isn't as good at losing his head as all that, Boris," sighed Giovanna.

"What is it then that it is that this leetle Jeemy is?" enquired the Pole.

"Oh, various things. My future husband; an English gentleman; a clean, honest nice person, who wouldn't know a mean and dirty trick if he saw one. The kind of man that you could never even begin to understand, Boris."

"Soh? The leetle Jeemy is all such, is it? And what is poor Boris?"

"Among other things, a great artist," smiled Giovanna.

"Yes, yes, we know zat. Everybody except dam' pig-fools knows zat. What I say is, if ze

nize pretty leetle Jeemy is fiancé, what is Boris ? "

" Our friend," replied Giovanna.

" Oh, yes, Boris be friend of nize leetle fam'ly. Make what they call triangle, hein ? " and the Franco-Polish gentleman roared with laughter and pressed his lips violently upon those of Giovanna, who struggled and fought with considerable skill but little success.

" No, I don't zink you marry zis Jeemy," Boris Goudroff continued, having reduced Giovanna to a state of limp quiescence.

" No, not yet, Jo. Not till I give the permission. I cannot marry you myself, because I haven't any money and because I haven't any dam'-foolishness to marry a woman. But nobody else isn't going to marry you, Jo. Not till Boris say it. I mean it—so be careful."

" Really ? " replied Giovanna. " Very interesting ! And how do you propose to prevent me from marrying Jimmy ? "

" Oh, I tell ze pretty leetle Jeemy he must not. I tell him I smack him ; then he be too frightened. I mean it, I say."

" Really, Boris, you positively are the most insufferably conceited creature outside a lunatic asylum. Do you really think that anything you said to Mr. Algernon Coxe would make the very slightest difference ? "

" No ? Well, I'll tell you what might make

leetle difference. Suppose you disobey poor Boris and go to marry this Jeemy, and Boris come round to your flat the night before and say '*No.*' And tell you what I do to you and to him if you annoys me an' nuisance me by making me jealous. *No,* I say."

"And suppose I say '*Yes,*'" interrupted Giovanna.

"That is what I tell. You say '*Yes*' and Boris say '*No,*' Jo. You say '*Yes*' once more and then I jes' wring your leetle neck like *so* and do you up in parcel and post you to Jeemy with a note saying, 'If you *will* have my Jo, here she is,' hein?"

Giovanna yawned.

"I don't think I'll ask you in for a drink after all," she said as the cab stopped. "You've served my purpose, and you can go."

"Then I tink perhaps I ask myself in and I serve my purpose and then I go. No?"

Giovanna considered.

Her little scheme for making Jimmy jealous had not been a success. Should she abandon it and dismiss this impossible creature forthwith; have a final rupture, and make an end of their one-sided friendship?

Not yet, perhaps—not at once.

Jimmy might yet be stirred to feel jealousy, and roused to object, if he found Boris very much at home in her flat one evening. The moment

he expostulated and said that Boris Goudroff was hardly a suitable friend, she would reply :

" Let's get married, Jimmy, and everything will be different. Giovanna Blayton's acquaintances won't be Mrs. Jimmy's friends. I'll never see one of them again, especially this man Boris Goudroff. Let's get married, Jimmy, and I shall have someone to look after me and keep me in order."

Yes, Boris Goudroff might yet be useful.

" Well, you may come in for a few minutes and have a drink, Boris, if you will behave yourself and go when I tell you," she said.

" Oh, yaas, I'm coming in all-right, Jo."

" Well, you won't have the chance much longer," said the girl . . . " I shall be leaving this flat, of course, when I marry . . . This'll be almost your last drink here, Boris."

Goudroff grinned.

" If you don't leave here till you marry, Leetle One, and don't marry till you leave here, Boris won't grumble you, hein ? You are my girl Giovanna, and nobody isn't goin' to marry you—not even me," and the lips of the worthy Boris grinned widely.

Giovanna noted that his eyes did not smile in the least.

Turning, she led the way upstairs and unlocked the door of her flat.

. . . . . .

"Time you were going, Boris. I'm tired."

"Tired? What's zat feel like? Zat why you are not nize to me to-night, No? All right, I go. I don't sit here and drink zis dam' nasty treacle, *crème de noyeau* and *crème de menthe*, an' look at a dam' nasty girl sitting on sofa any longer. Sooner drink crème de moo-cow and look at English big-tooth' spinster sitting on sofa in Royal Academy . . . Bah!"

Giovanna yawned.

"An' don't you play too much tricks wiz me, you Giovanna. You and your leetle Jeemy! I show you a something. And never say I didn't fair warned you. I bad enemy, see?"

"You're bad everything, Boris," replied Giovanna. "Rotten bad. Good-night."

And Boris Goudroff slouched out of the flat, banging doors behind him with shattering violence.

CHAPTER VI

WHEN Algernon, returning from *The Green Haddock*, reached home in the small hours of the morning, he found with despondency and alarm that his mother was there, and waiting up for him.

Waiting "*up*," with a special peculiar intonation and a heavy emphasis upon the "up," was one of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's favourite expressions—one of her verbal specialities, conveying a world of reproach, accusation and disapproval.

She had arrived unexpectedly at the Kensington house, as was her wont, with the intention of remaining indefinitely, as was also her wont.

In a surprisingly short time she extracted from the reluctant Algernon a full account of all his doings since last she had seen him, and particularly of his admittedly deplorable activities of that evening.

If *The Green Haddock* and its habitués had seemed strange and undesirable in reality, how more than strange, how more than undesirable did they seem in the description.

If, on the homeward journey, Algernon had thought the place and people unpleasing and unprofitable, he now—as he falteringly described them in the cold and rarefied atmosphere of his mother's presence, and beneath the cold and penetrating judgment of her clear and steady eye—not merely thought, but knew, them to be worthless, raffish and disgusting.

And once again he saw Giovanna take the colour of her surroundings; beheld her with the pitiless criticism of his mother's all-seeing eye; compared her character and her life with those of his mother; and once again realized how truly right his mother was.

Not a word of condemnation or criticism was uttered by Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, but every sentence of Algernon's replies to her questions resolved itself into a clear condemnation and a harsh criticism.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was a very clever woman. Her son was not a clever man.

Often and often had he told his mother a lie. Never had he successfully deceived her and never, never had he disobeyed her command.

"My son," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, when all had been confessed and the full and true account of the evening laid bare in all its hideousness.

"You must see for yourself that this cannot

go on. Even if you were lost to all self-respect, all sense of duty to yourself, you have a duty to your father and, possibly, if I may suggest it, a duty to me, your mother.

" My dear boy, you must *see* that it can't go on. The moment you were away from me—as that Doctor Desart was so anxious for you to be—you at once got into trouble, fell from grace. To put it in the kindest and mildest way, you made a terrible mistake.

" Happily it is not too late to rectify it. You turned aside from the right path and took a false step. Thank God, you can withdraw. You can return to the right path, to the way of your mother's teaching . . .

" Algernon, *think*. Think of all you yourself have told me to-night; think of that girl's manners and conduct in my house; think of what she has done; what she has been; what she is; and ask yourself how you can persist in it."

" Mother, I have promised that I . . ." stammered her wretched son.

" Algernon," Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe swept on, " if you are willing to break your mother's heart for this . . . this . . . I will not call her what she certainly is . . . If you are willing to bring your poor Father's grey hairs in sorrow to the grave, even so, think of yourself if you will not think of us.

" Algernon, to thine own self be true, and it follows as the night the day, thou canst not be untrue to your mother, your whole upbringing, your God . . .

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe paused and fell silent, coldly and sorrowfully eyeing the unhappy Algernon.

" To think that you could ever come into your mother's presence straight from this girl's rooms —or room . . . How and where *does* she live, by the way ? "

" She has a flat at 22, Blenheim Street, Marlborough Circus," replied Algernon, somewhat sulkily, and without looking at his mother as he spoke.

Had he been doing so, he would have observed a sudden and most remarkable change in the expression of her face.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe almost gasped.

" *What ?* " she whispered, her face hardening, her eyes narrowing, a heavy frown contracting her brows.

It was as though her son had suddenly used foul and obscene language, or uttered some incredible insult.

" *What* did you say, Algernon ? "

And one firm white hand rose from her lap to her breast.

" 22, Blenheim Street, Marlborough Circus, is Giovanna's address. Quite a good road, and

a very nice little flat . . . What's the matter, Mother ? "

For, though her expression was inscrutable, her face had paled, and she was obviously under the influence of some powerful emotion. Was it anger, fear, indignation, horror, or a blending of them all ?

Certainly he had, in some way, given his mother a terrible shock.

Was she really pale, or was it a trick of light and of his imagination ?

No, she was white to the lips and staring at him and through him as though he were a ghost, or as though through him and behind him she could see a ghost.

Nor was Algernon's fancy far astray.

Minerva Coxe was seeing ghosts indeed. Ghosts of her youth, her innocence, her happiness . . . and of a man.

Seeing terribly the ghost of a man.

Algernon stared at his mother in surprise, the while his mother stared through him in horror and dismay.

" What is it, Mother ? What is the matter ? Are you ill ? " he cried, conscience-stricken and alarmed.

Moistening dry grey lips, she asked in a low and toneless voice.

" Who told you that address ? "

" What do you mean, Mother ? "

"Where did you hear that address?"

"It's Giovanna's address. She lives there."

"How did she find it out?"

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"How did she find it out, I say? She must have known of it . . . But *how*?"

"I don't understand you, Mother."

"She must have heard of it. It is intentional. She went there deliberately and took you there. Yes . . . yes . . . I see it. Deliberate and intentional. But how did she know of it? *How?*"

"What do you mean, Mother?"

"How long has the girl been there?"

"Oh, a long time . . . Two or three years."

"You mean that she took that flat and lived in it, before you knew her."

"Yes, Mother. Why?"

"You're perfectly sure? Absolutely certain that she took that flat and lived in it before she'd ever set eyes on you? Before she even knew of your existence?"

"Yes. Mother. Why?"

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe appeared to be relieved by her son's assurance.

The colour slowly returned to her face, and there now appeared to be less of fear and anger, in her look, than of puzzlement and incredulity.

"22, Blenheim Street, Marlborough Circus," she said softly, wonderingly. "Is there a

church almost opposite to the house, Algernon ? "

" Yes, Mother. Why ? Do you know the house ? "

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's hand fell again to her lap and clasped the other, her knuckles showing white.

" It sounds vaguely familiar," she said. " It struck me that I'd heard it before. I rather fancy that, curiously enough, a friend of mine actually lived there . . . Or it may have been at some other house in the same road, or possibly it was Marlborough Crescent. And anyhow, it was years ago, long before you were born, so it's of no great interest."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was herself again—or almost so.

Suddenly she rose to her feet.

" Come here, my boy," she continued, and placing her hands upon his shoulders, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe fixed the deep gaze of her clear, hard eyes upon those of her son, and seemed to hold them while they endeavoured to evade.

" Algernon, you will not marry this girl," she said slowly. " You will break off all relation with her. You will never see her again nor answer any letter that she may write to you."

Algernon's eyes fell.

" Mother ! I . . ."

" You will not defy your mother. You will

not disobey her, you will not break her heart for the first loose-living woman that makes eyes at you."

"Mother, she's . . ."

"You will choose, Algernon. You will choose between her and your mother, *now*, and choose finally. *You will never again see your mother*, Algernon, or else you will never see this . . . this . . . girl again."

"Mother, Giovanna is . . ."

"I will go and re-pack my suit-case now, Algernon, walk to Waterloo, and sit in the waiting-room until the first train goes to Melfont Parva in the morning, unless you . . ."

"Mother, I . . ."

"Choose, Algernon."

"I must see her once if only to say good-bye."

"Very well, my son, you may see her once again—to say good-bye. And now I will say good-night.

"Sleep well, *for you have chosen wisely*."

And Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe kissed Algernon firmly on the brow.

§ 2

On the following morning Algernon by special request—conveyed with special intonation—accompanied his mother to Melfont Parva, and, with innate and trained suggestibility, soon came to see the truth of his mother's carefully

unuttered suggestion of Agatha Sharp's infinite superiority to Giovanna Blayton.

Agatha practically lived at the Vicarage, and it was Algernon's privilege, each evening, after a day of easy and pleasant parochial activities, gentle tennis on the shady lawn, music in the cool drawing-room, and strolls about the moonlit garden, to escort Agatha to her door.

And so the days went by . . .

Receiving no letter from Giovanna, Algernon wrote none to her, and gradually the image of her dark beauty was somewhat obliterated or temporarily obscured by the blonde loveliness of Agatha.

Ere long, Algernon walked in a dream of fair women, and their twain images seemed to fuse, seemed to grow composite, to be superimposed the one upon the other.

And here and now, in the great peace of Melfont Parva, that of Agatha rather predominated.

Obviously and most essentially Agatha was a gentlewoman and had every one of the noble qualities that that fine word connotes.

And that Agatha was obviously and essentially a fool also, seemed a small matter. One does not desire brains in women or, to proceed from the undemonstrable general to the plain particular, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe did not desire brains in a daughter-in-law, nor Algernon in a wife.

For, gently, warily, but inexorably, the strong hand of his mother guided Algernon's faltering footsteps along a peaceful easy path that led toward the point whence he should behold the dawn of a new, a higher and a better life—life with Agatha Sharp.

Gradually and slowly, as night changes to-day, and as dawn imperceptibly grows and alters from black to grey and from grey to palest gold and faintest rose, so dawned upon the unshocked consciousness of Algernon, the perception that fates and forces outside himself, fates and forces too strong for him, were ordaining that he should engage himself to Agatha.

Clearly, his mother expected it.

Evening after evening, as she kissed him on the brow, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe would ask, with raised eyebrows and expression faintly arch :

" Have you anything to tell me, Algernon ? "

" Er—er, no ; er—no, Mother."

" Not yet, my dear boy ? "

" Er—no, Mother. What should there be ? "

" Oh, come, come, you sly rogue. Do you think your own mother doesn't see what is going on ? "

And when, from time to time, Algernon would suggest that he thought he would run up to town to-morrow for a day or two, his mother would negative the suggestion with some such reply as :

"Oh, not to-morrow, dear. We'll all three go up, a little later on. So much nicer for you. You'll love to take Agatha to some good Concerts."

And when his conscience pricked him, as it slightly did from time to time, Algernon would reflect that inasmuch as Giovanna had not written, she could not be suffering any feeling of neglect.

But Giovanna had written, urgent and despairing letters, and Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, albeit an honourable and Christian woman, had considered it her duty to shield her son from the evil consequences of their receipt.

What Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe considered it her duty to do, that she invariably did; and anything that Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe desired to do, she invariably regarded as a duty.

So, increasingly conscious of his fate, the little victim played, and soon ceased to struggle against the ineluctable end.

§ 3

One evening, an evening of full moon, perfect as only an English evening can be, Algernon, a little troubled by his conscience, a little piqued by Giovanna's silence, more than a little desirous of love and understanding, greatly admiring Agatha's gentle beauty and most

greatly yearning for finality, an end of mental struggle, stress and strain, suddenly and impulsively flung his arms about Agatha as she sat beside him in the shade of the great old cedar, and kissed her on the ear.

Agatha's arms stole about his neck and with a queer little half-sobbing catch of the breath, she returned his kiss in equal measure and upon his lips.

"*Agatha!*"

"*Algernon!*"

When they entered the drawing-room, there was no need for Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe to enquire whether Algernon had anything to tell her, and the good woman devoutly and humbly thanked God for all that *He* had done in achieving for her her heart's desire.

This was indeed an Answer to Prayer—prayer aided a little, perhaps, by the suppression of letters, the remorseless application of the power of suggestion, and the equally remorseless vilification of an innocent girl.

It was Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's favourite dictum that Heaven helps those who help themselves, and surely Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had helped herself industriously?

CHAPTER VII

"THE highest and truest happiness lies in making others happy . . . You have made me very happy, Algernon," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, as, seated on a sofa in the drawing-room of Algernon's town house, that determined and indomitable woman beamed upon her son and her daughter-in-law elect.

Though Algernon could find no flaw in this admirable argument, he failed to square practice with theory, for, in point of fact, far from enjoying the highest and truest happiness, he discovered himself to be profoundly miserable.

Loving Agatha, engaged to marry Agatha at a very early date, he longed for Giovanna ; and daily the longing increased until it became an unbearable yearning that was rapidly crystallizing into a mad and reprehensible determination to go and kiss her instead of Agatha.

Her silence puzzled and worried him.

Twice and thrice he had attempted to telephone to her and had received no reply. Twice and thrice he had sat down to write to her and

each time had torn the letter up, on reaching the sentence :

"I am now engaged to another woman."

It sounded absurdly as though he was providing Giovanna with a companion wife, as a kindly Mussalman might do, fearing lest Number One at times be lonely.

Besides, never having broken off his engagement to Giovanna, how could he be engaged to Agatha ?

What *had* he done ?

And once again, in a bath of cold perspiration he realized that there he sat, Algernon Dashwood Coxe, in his own Kensington house, solemnly, seriously, and formally engaged to two women at once.

What had he done ?

And what would Giovanna do ?

Would she institute an action against him for Breach of Promise, bringing public disgrace and shame upon his mother, his father, Agatha and himself ?

She might well do so.

What a terrible and ghastly thought.

What a cad and a cur he would look in the Law Courts. Fancy hearing all his letters read out in Court—his intimate private love-letters to Giovanna—punctuated by the loud guffaws of jeering apes.

From cold perspiration, Algernon went hot all over, at the thought of such a thing.

And this letter that he could not write. If he did succeed in composing it, and sent it to her, that would also be read out.

No, he must go and see her—not only because he yearned and burned to see her and touch her and hold her in his arms again, but because he could explain better, could make her understand how it came about, could beg her to forgive him—and could solemnly swear that not only did he love her just as much, but if such a thing were possible, far more than ever.

And also there was another thing—though no man retaining any shreds of decency and self-respect, any rags of honour to cover his weak baseness, must for a moment glance at it—Giovanna, simply refusing to accept the situation, refusing to hear a word about Agatha Sharp, *might* seize him and whirl him away . . . away from this terrible milieu of entanglements, compulsions, interference and misery.

But of course such a dream was absurd.

How could he possibly treat his mother so?

Or rather, how could he possibly treat Agatha so?

Dear, sweet, gentle, beautiful Agatha. How he hated her now that he had to marry her.

It was Giovanna he wanted. Giovanna—that bright flame.

Giovanna, who loved him and understood him. Giovanna, who would mother him and

take responsibilities and who would never harry, interfere, compel and impose her will upon him.

Yes, Giovanna was a flame, a fire; and Agatha was tepid water—but the tepid water could not quench the fire in his heart.

He must go and see Giovanna.

§ 2

Algernon went.

Ensconced upon the big sofa, he found Boris Goudroff beside whom Giovanna had evidently been sitting.

"Good-evening," said Giovanna. "Kind of you to call."

"Soh!" exploded Goudroff, "it is our leetle Jeemy. Our nize pretty leetle Jeemy that has been hiding from us so long. Naughty boy, Jeemy. I sink I put you 'cross my knee. I sink I smack you, Jeemy, for making Giovanna unhappy; and then I say 'You go 'way, Jeemy, and don't you never come back no more. You make Giovanna unhappy and, much more worse, you make Boris Goudroff unhappy . . . So you go to 'ell.'"

Algernon Coxe had never really lacked physical courage. Completely ignoring the gigantic Goudroff, save for a quietly contemptuous glance, he asked Giovanna if he could see her alone, or whether, if the occasion were incon-

venient, she would make an appointment for that purpose.

"Get out, Boris," said Giovanna, trying to suppress and hide the wild joy she felt, the surge of ecstatic happiness and gratitude to God. "You are *de trop*—now. Come in again to-morrow."

"Nozzing doing," replied Goudroff. "Why, you have not nearly enough kizz me, yet. You going to sit on my knee and kizz me some more and make lof to me," and he grinned malevolently at Algernon, displaying ripe red lips and great gleaming teeth through his black beard.

Algernon turned to the door that he had just closed, and opening it wide, stood waiting.

Giovanna faced the sprawling Franco-Russian-Pole, her mouth set and her eye glinting.

"Get out," she said again and pointed to the door. "You'll go now, or you'll never come back."

"All right. Kizz me again then, Joey, and I come again to-morrow for some more, hein?"

And beneath the disapproving eye of the disgusted Algernon, Giovanna kissed the Russian, clapped his big black felt hat upon his head, and hustled him from the flat—brushing her fingers thereafter as though removing pollution after contact with something unclean.

"And now, James?" she asked, closing the door of the room, and turning to Algernon, her face a clever mask of cool and disapproving ivory.

What followed was truly terrible to both these hapless people; and her lover's confession that he had actually engaged himself to another woman, without a word to his affianced bride, awakened, and turned to flame indeed, every drop of Neapolitan blood in Giovanna's body.

To Algernon, his beloved and beautiful Giovanna became a fiend incarnate, a she-devil, a vulgar and terrible woman who poured forth a deadly stream of vituperative insult, lashing him with scorching epithet and burning him with a scalding flow of dreadful invective, every sentence of which was rendered the more horrible by its ghastly and pitiable truth.

And it was doubtless the undeniable truth of the accusations and the insults that made Algernon do what in his whole lifetime he had rarely done—lose his temper and, with it, all self-control.

Before long, the two, furious, despairing; mad with rage, jealousy and sense of wrong; beside themselves with pain and grief and horror, were equally unbalanced and distraught; and, with accusation and insult, each

lashing the other to greater rage . . . each hating the other beyond expression . . . each loving the other unbearably . . . each eager to wound, willing and able to strike.

" *You*, sitting there, pawing and kissing that filthy Russian beast, and inviting him here again to-morrow. Lying in his arms on that sofa ; that foul mass of corruption and bestiality from your stinking night-club. You dissipated, flirting, depraved . . . Oh, *forgive* me, Giovanna darling."

" And you, you miserable, weak, backboneless jelly-fish. You poor feeble, witless, gutless mother's-darling. *You* should talk about Boris Goudroff. My God ! He *is* a man, anyhow . . . One night you're here, engaged to me, going to marry me quite soon, and a few nights later you're engaged to another girl and going to marry her quite soon.

" You treacherous cur. Well, I pity the girl, you cowardly unreliable swindler ; you miserable, priggish, worthless imitation. Get your loathsome mother to make you some little knickerbockers and buy you some little socks. And then, never you let go of her hand again—except for her to wipe your nose . . . Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy ! Don't break my heart. You love *me*, you know you do ! . . ."

And Giovanna flung herself down upon the sofa, her face buried in the cushions, her little

body cruelly shaken from head to foot by rending sobs.

"Oh, Jimmy, Jimmy, how could you? How *could* you?"

"Oh, don't, Giovanna, don't . . . Oh, darling, don't cry like that . . . Yes! I'll give her up! *I'll give her up!*"

Giovanna sprang erect with blazing eyes and outstretched finger that almost touched his face.

"Give her up! You worm . . . You scrap of tissue-paper . . . Give her up? Yes, until you get home, and your mother lifts her little finger, and the girl grins at you. Give her up for how long? You *liar*! You poor weak, shifty cad! You creeping, crawling, sneaking jilt . . . Making love to two girls at once . . ."

"And what about you? What were you doing when I came in to-night? What about making love to two men at once? You deceitful disreputable . . ."

"What, *I*? *I* make love to a man? Oh, so you'd add the vilest insult to the foulest injury, would you? By God! You've done it to the wrong woman, Algernon Coxe. Don't you think you'll do this to me, and come off scot-free. If it's to be insults and injuries you'll find you're not the only one who can do a little in the injuring line. You are the most despicable and contemptible cad and cur and weakling that ever . . ."

And so it went on.

At last, unbearably hurt and insufferably insulted by the cruellest truths which were therefore the truest cruelties, Algernon sprang to his feet and strode to the door. Throwing it open and turning to shut it behind him, he looked at Giovanna, and for a second hung in doubt.

And his fate, his very life, and those of Giovanna Blayton, for a second hung in doubt also . . .

How could he leave her thus, weeping distraught and broken-hearted; he, the scoundrel who had broken her heart?

But she had said dreadful unforgivable things.

But they were true, and he undeniably was everything that she had called him.

He could not leave her thus, and if he did not escape now, he would have just such a scene with Agatha, equally wronged, insulted and broken-hearted.

And his mother! . . .

How could he face his mother if unable to tell her that he had broken with Giovanna, once and for all, and bidden her good-bye for ever?

He could not do it.

He must go.

Algernon Coxe turned upon his heel.

"*Jimmy! Jimmy!*" and, leaping from the couch, Giovanna rushed toward him.

"*Jimmy!*"

He turned again, and the girl threw herself into his arms—and the fate of these two was sealed.

For a minute they clung together, weeping, kissing, incoherent. Then drawing her lover back into the room, Giovanna closed and locked the door and led him to the sofa.

"Sit down, my darling," she said, and drew him down beside her.

"My darling, *my darling*, you can't leave me like this; and I cannot let you go . . . Oh Jimmy, forgive me and—*stay with me.*"

Stay with her!

Yes, he *must* stay a little longer with her, thought Jimmy.

Yes, now he must stay altogether, thought Giovanna, or she would lose him altogether.

He must not go back to that house, that horrible mother and that other woman who had taken him from her.

Now was the time to play her last card, the trump card that should win this dreadful game.

Giovanna played her last card and found herself a woman scorned.

Even she had under-estimated the strength of the inhibitions stamped and sealed in her lover's

mind during its plastic and receptive years; even she had failed to realize that, to Algernon Coxe, even while madly and passionately in love, sex was the Terrible Thing, the physical manifestation of passion (ere blessed and sanctified by his Church) the true Sin Against the Holy Ghost; even she had not understood that from babyhood he had been seared, had been branded and had had burnt into him the belief that to "fall" as Adam fell was not only blackest Sin—but a thing utterly foul, horrible, degrading, dirty and beastly beyond description.

So Giovanna failed—and Minerva Coxe won.

Giovanna, temptress innocent and pure of heart, was spurned—and Hell had no fury like Giovanna scorned . . .

"*Go*, you hound," she gasped, and her Neapolitan mother—who slew herself because James Augustus Blayton wearied of her—would have recognized herself in her daughter. "Go before I kill you."

And she struck him in the face with all her strength.

CHAPTER VIII

MR. AND MRS. ALGERNON COXE went for their honeymoon to Bournemouth.

In the mild air of England's most beautiful town, they mildly loved and lived and had their being—Agatha's a truly happy being, marred only by a strong suspicion that her *distrait* husband was sometimes thinking of That Other Woman; Algernon's a truly miserable being, brightened only by the hope that a measure of outward peace might now accrue to him.

"'*For men must kill the thing they love!*'" he would whisper to himself, and shudder.

One beautiful evening, as they sat upon a seat in the calm silence of the high East Cliff and gazed toward the distant Purbeck Hills and Old Harry Rocks across the bay, his arm stole about Agatha's waist as her beautiful head sank upon his shoulder.

"Isn't it utterly perfect," she whispered.

"Perfect, Giovanna," he replied, and they sprang apart as though stung.

"You *are* thinking of that horrible woman!" cried Agatha. "I knew it! I've said so a dozen times . . ."

She had, thought Algernon, and a dozen dozen.

"No, no, dearest Agatha," he reassured her.

"And I suppose that's why you call me '*Giovanna*,'" snapped his mortified and unappeased wife. "Giovanna, indeed! Do you *want* to insult me, Algernon? . . If you're always thinking of the wretched creature, why didn't you marry her?"

"Why indeed!" thought the profoundly unhappy husband.

"I shall tell Mamma when she comes tomorrow," continued Agatha, who was beginning to exhibit signs that she might quite conceivably develop into a first-class nagger.

"Oh, don't tell Mother, dearest Agatha," pleaded Algernon. "It would make her awfully unhappy if she thought . . ."

"But it doesn't matter if I'm made awfully unhappy, I suppose; if *I* think . . ."

"Well, don't think it, darling, it's absurd."

"And it's not absurd, I suppose, for you to call me 'Giovanna.' But it's quite absurd for me to object to being called by another woman's name—and *such* a woman . . . Fancy a young wife, not a month married, being called by

the name of another woman—a bad woman who was her husband's mistress!"

"*Agatha!* . . ."

"Well, I'm glad you do remember my name, Algernon. On the whole, I prefer it to one that suggests barrel-organs and ice-cream . . . and vice."

Algernon sighed and held his peace—the beginnings of wisdom—and the little storm blew itself out.

§ 2

Mamma, installed in Mother's Room, was awaiting the happy couple, to welcome them on their arrival at the house wherein they were, she fervently hoped, to live long long happy years beneath her watchful guidance.

The faithful and ancient retainers, galvanized to new life, had the house in beautiful readiness and Mamma herself ordered the home-coming dinner, and, with her own firm capable hands, arranged the flowers with perfect precision if not perfect grace.

Warmly she kissed her devoted daughter-in-law with a—

"Welcome, dearest Agatha, to your home. May you never know a moment's unhappiness."

And kindly she kissed her son with a—

"Dear boy, I'm sure you're going to be so happy—now that you have been so sensible."

But upstairs in the bedroom, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe learned from a tired and inclined-to-be-tearful Agatha that Algernon was still thinking of That Woman.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe pooh-poohed the idea that this was a matter of the slightest interest or moment.

"But of course, my dear," she said reassuringly, "it's only natural and inevitable that a man should sometimes think of the girl to whom he has been actually engaged. It would be a very extraordinary thing if he didn't. What he is saying to himself as he gazes at you is:

"'*Thank Heaven that I escaped that woman Giovanna.*' And with the name on the tip of his tongue like that, he utters it.

"His very thought, his grateful thought, '*This is not that girl Giovanna*' causes him to say the name that is in his mind, even though it be, as it undoubtedly now is, a name repugnant to him."

"Perhaps so . . . I hope so," replied Agatha, but with a shade more of doubt than of hope in her words.

And sufficient of doubt remained in the mind of Agatha—a mind neither deep nor broad, nor capable of large content—to make her incline to be a little watchful, faintly fearful, and slightly suspicious.

The unopened envelopes of Algernon's letters were of deep, and faintly painful, interest; and so, very soon, were the letters they contained.

For, as she had to admit, Algernon concealed nothing, and left his letters, awaiting answer, lying for days at a time upon the beautiful old bureau that had belonged to the great-great-grandfather of the old old lady from whom Algernon had inherited it.

A most attractive and fascinating piece of furniture this, and one that obviously interested Agatha more than any other piece in the house.

It had large drawers and little drawers, large cupboards and little cupboards, horizontal pigeon-holes and perpendicular pigeon-holes and, alas, one or two locked drawers and locked cupboards.

Doubtless there were secret drawers and secret cupboards also; and a secret drawer was a thing that intrigued, fascinated and indeed almost obsessed Agatha.

For a secret drawer may contain a secret—souvenirs, photographs, love-tokens, or even secret letters secretly received from a discarded lover, or from a lover only apparently discarded.

And if there were not guilty love-letters of to-day, there might be a packet of less guilty love-letters of yesterday; and with such love-

letters, a jealous wife might torture herself most exquisitely.

Moreover, having read them, she might torture and punish her husband. She might extract sentences, phrases, personal and particular expressions, terms of endearment and use them in bitter mockery and contempt.

One day Agatha's industry, patience and ingenuity were rewarded.

Pulling, one after the other, at each of the partitions between the pigeon-holes, she heard a sharp click. The back of the pigeon-hole flew open as the spring was released, and disclosed a little chamber, some six inches square. In this reposed, not an ancient will, a faded rose, a love-token trinket, not a packet of letters tied up with blue ribbon—but three modern and prosaic keys, the largest an obvious latch-key, the others apparent keys of drawers, boxes or trunks.

To the latch-key a common linen label was tied.

Why conceal keys?

One put certain keys in a safe place, of course, but why conceal them in a secret cavity?

A concealed latch-key! Intriguing and suspicious!

Agatha drew out the latch-key first, and with a cold pain at her heart, and a sensation of shock and of faintness, read the words:

Key of Giovanna's flat.

Oh! . . Oh! . . .

So the mild, amiable, and virtuous Algernon had the key of Giovanna's flat, had he? *Oh!* . . .

And Agatha sat staring at the horrible thing, her hand pressed against her heart.

And the two smaller keys? With what deception and wickedness were they connected?

And instantly Giovanna thought of the big and heavy steel box that she had discovered in the locked-up tank-room when she and Algernon were making a thorough and complete tour of her new home.

She had had to get the key of that room from Algernon.

Yes, that box had two locks, she remembered, and the key-holes were more or less of the size that these keys would fit.

What was it Algernon had said when, at lunch one day, she had remarked:

"What is in the locked trunk in the tank-room, dear? That big heavy one with the empty trunks beside and on top of it?"

So far as she could remember, he had said:

"Oh, odds and ends; books, bric-à-brac, pictures, that sort of thing."

Had he looked self-conscious and guilty as he answered the question? To the best of her recollection he had stammered and stuttered a

little, but then Algernon was apt to do that at any time, if suddenly questioned.

Had she pursued the subject at all? Yes, she recalled saying:

"Why not have them out? Or are they just rubbish?"

And now she distinctly remembered his reply.

"Oh, they're not mine really . . . Let 'em alone . . . The box won't be there long."

And, supposing that he was minding the box for somebody, she had let the subject drop . . .

And now to see whether these two keys fitted the two locks of that same box, and, if so, to discover the reason for such secrecy as well as care, in their concealment.

Yes, this was not mere safe-keeping. It was *concealment.*

Why?

And straightway she went upstairs, got the key, entered the tank-room, always, for some reason, kept locked, and quickly discovered that the keys did indeed fit the key-holes as she had anticipated.

CHAPTER IX

CROSSING the hall from the library to the drawing-room, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was startled by the sound of an appalling scream.

Shriek after shriek rang through the otherwise silent house.

There followed the sound of a heavy fall, and silence reigned once more.

With a little less than her usual majestic dignity, and at a little more than her accustomed unhasting speed, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe almost hurried up the stairs.

Unguided by any sound, she entered each of the rooms above, and finally climbed to the highest floor where were the maids' bedrooms and the lumber-room, which, on account of its containing the great cistern, was known as the tank-room.

Seeing that the door of this room was open, a most unusual event—as her son had recently kept it locked and retained the key until Agatha had enquired why, and had asked for it—Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe entered the room and saw her daughter-in-law lying motionless upon her back

before an open trunk, a big black box that she had hitherto never seen.

"Why, Agatha, my dear!" she said, and, as she bent over the prostrate girl, saw what the box contained—the most hideous, ghastly, and terrible sight that her eyes had ever beheld.

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe neither screamed nor fainted, but slamming down the lid of the box, seized Agatha by the arm and dragged her unceremoniously from the room.

This done, she turned, shut the door, locked it, removed the key, and stood eyeing the inanimate Agatha.

"*The servants!*" she whispered, and, dragging Agatha head foremost to the top of the stairs, put her strong arms about the girl's slight body, and partly carried, partly dragged, her to her own bedroom on the floor below.

Here, loosening the girl's clothing, spraying her with eau-de-cologne, placing cold wet handkerchiefs on her neck, forehead and wrists, applying smelling-salts to her nostrils, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe soon restored her to consciousness.

Sitting up upon the bed, Agatha stared wildly round.

"*Oh!* . . *oh!* . . I dreamt . . ."

And then:

"*The corpse! The corpse!*" she shrieked. "*He's got that woman's body in the box!* . ."

And uttered an insane scream . . .

" Hush, you fool . . . I mean, you foolish girl," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, with angry urgency. " The servants ! . . ."

And as Agatha commenced to scream again, she clapped her hand upon the open mouth, and forced Agatha back upon the pillow.

" Be quiet," she said, as though addressing a dog. " Be quiet, will you ! Pull yourself together and be helpful. Control yourself . . . the servants . . . passers-by . . ."

Seizing Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe's wrist in both hands, Agatha tore the hand from her mouth.

" *Murder !* " she shrieked. " *Murder !* . . . Your son is a murderer, and you've married me to him. *I am married to a murderer.* He'll be hanged, and I shall be a murderer's widow. People will point at me . . ."

" *Quiet,* I tell you . . . If you make another sound, I'll . . . I'll . . . Let me think . . ."

If Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe had, like the rest of us, sinned the sins of pride, self-sufficiency, self-righteousness, arrogance and selfishness—she now suffered.

For here was she—God's Own Good Woman, Wife of the Rector of Melfont Parva, Model and Inspiration to the County, a Leading and a Shining Light unto all men, and particularly unto all women—in her son's house, with the murdered body of her son's lover, and with

her son's wife shrieking, "*Your son is a murderer . . .*"

And, as she mentally staggered beneath the dreadful blow, she realized that she had brought her punishment upon herself, and that had she not schemed for her own ends, the murdered girl would be alive; and her son a happy man—instead of standing within the very shadow of the gallows.

As she had sinned, she suffered.

But Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe was not the woman meekly to accept punishment, to be shocked into submission to fate, nor to be crushed beneath a burden of sorrow, be it flung upon her never so suddenly.

'*My head is bloody but unbowed.*'

What to do?

Her son must be saved.

This screaming fool must be silenced.

Had the servants heard anything?

Was there already a crowd outside the house?

"Agatha," she said, as the girl struggled with her. "*Quiet!* . . . Listen . . . We must save Algernon."

"I won't be dragged into it! I *won't*!" cried the girl . . . "They'll bring me into it. They'll say I helped him do it. They'll say I knew the body was hidden here all the time."

"No, they won't. No, they won't," urged Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. "Don't you see? *No*

one need ever know. No one *does* know yet, but you and I . . . and Algernon."

"I won't be dragged into it, I tell you. I *won't,*" cried the girl again. "It's what they call being accessory after the fact, and they might hang me, too. At best, they'd send me to prison for life . . . And you, too," she added. "Both of us dragged to gaol . . . To spend years in prison, through your precious son. It serves you right . . . marrying me to a murderer . . . I believe you knew all the time . . ."

"She's mad," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

And it was indeed obvious that the shock had completely unhinged Agatha's none too solid and stable intellect.

Thought after thought flashed through the mother's agonized but clear efficient mind.

Could she cajole this selfish noisy fool into silence about her appalling discovery?

No, this poor shallow soul had but the one thought—self-preservation.

And what about the girl's self-preservation from shame, disgrace, social ruin and the horrors of the public pillory of the press? But she'd fear even more the danger of being held, as she herself had said, accessory after the fact.

Could she bribe her?

How?

Could she give her an injection or a sleeping-

draught? Keep her drugged and unconscious for days, somehow dispose of the box, and then persuade her that she had been ill, and that her memories of the corpse in the tank-room were but those of a hideous nightmare?

Hopeless . . .

The girl had had her eye on that box for some time, and she knew what she knew.

Could she somehow get the box away?

Algernon must do it: take it out of the house and bury it in the garden or leave it at the left-luggage office of some railway terminus for a start—and then declare the girl insane, swear there never had been any such box in the house.

Could she *kill* her here and now? And the strong white hands flexed and clenched.

The mind of Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe recoiled from that abyss, and for a moment, for the first time in her life, she was filled with a human sympathy for human sinners, and had a clear glimpse of the terrible compulsion under which some murders come to be committed.

Thus must poor Algernon have felt, ere driven to do this dreadful deed.

What could she do?

The question was answered and the matter taken from her hands forthwith, for, with a swift evasion, Agatha eluded her grasp, sprang from the bed, dodged, ducked beneath an outstretched arm, rushed from the room and, with a cry of—

"I *won't* be dragged into it," fled down the stairs screaming:

"*Help! Murder! Help!*" at the top of her voice.

Ere Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe could overtake her, the girl had gained the morning-room in which stood the telephone, and had slammed and locked the door.

A moment later she was ringing up the police.

CHAPTER X

THE trial of Algernon Dashwood Coxe was held at the Central Criminal Court, Old Bailey, London, before Mr. Justice Jermyn; the Counsel for the Crown being Sir Henry Mackworth White and Mr. Eustace O'Gorman, instructed by the Director of Public Prosecutions; the Counsel for the prisoner being Sir Everard Witherby and Mr. Julius Warde, instructed by Mr. William Harringay; the indictment being: THE KING against Algernon Dashwood Coxe.

Presentment of the Grand Jury: Algernon Dashwood Coxe is charged with the following offence:

Statement of Offence: Murder.

Particulars of Offence: Algernon Dashwood Coxe on a date unknown in the County of Middlesex and within the jurisdiction of the Central Criminal Court murdered Giovanna Giulia Francesca Bianca Orsola Blayton.

The Clerk of the Court: "Algernon Dashwood Coxe, you are charged on indictment and also on an inquisition found against you by a

Coroner's Jury that on a date unknown in this year you murdered Giovanna Giulia Francesca Bianca Orsola Blayton. Are you Guilty or Not Guilty?"

Prisoner: "Not Guilty."

A Jury was then sworn.

Algernon Coxe, looking and feeling dazed and incredulous, and with something of the air of an awakened somnambulist, gazed about him at the Court wherein he was to be tried for his life.

Wearily and almost stupidly he stared at the Judge, an imposing, stately, awe-inspiring, and indeed somewhat terrifying figure, with his grim austere face, an impression of bushy eyebrows, piercing grey eyes, prominent nose and thin-lipped straight mouth, framed between the great grey wig and red robe.

His life lay in the hands of this man.

Or did it lie in the hands of that oddly-assorted heterogeneous dozen of men and women in the Jury box?

He had heard their names read out, had heard their voices gabbling the oath, and watched them change by this strange metamorphosis from a group of commonplace men and women of like passions with him, into a hydra-headed Fate.

Was the Judge bound by what they said—merely a lever of the great legal machine which would be set in motion either to crush him to death in its grinding mills or to cast him forth into the pure air and sweet sunshine of life?

He believed that that was so.

If the Jury said he was guilty, the Judge must hang him, and if the Jury said he was not guilty, then the Judge must set him free.

Yes, but could not the Judge practically tell them whether they were to find him guilty or not guilty, and would not they be bound to obey him?

If so, that might be Law but it wasn't Justice. If he, Algernon Dashwood Coxe were on a Jury, and formed the opinion that the accused was innocent, he would not agree to finding him guilty if a hundred Judges so directed him a hundred times.

He studied the faces of the Jury.

He liked the look of the seaman-like Foreman, a brown-faced, blue-eyed man, who might have been an Admiral, intelligent, kindly, strong, a gentleman, one who very probably had sat on many a Court Martial.

If he thought a man was innocent, he'd say so and stick to it in the face of any amount of direction by the Judge.

Next to him was a woman.

Was it a good thing—from the prisoner's point of view—to have women on Juries?

One could not generalize; one might, perhaps, expect a woman to be more averse from capital punishment than a man, and less disposed to have the death of a fellow-creature on her conscience.

Are not women the gentler sex—definitely softer, kinder, more forgiving than men? 'When pain and anguish wring the brow, a ministering angel thou' . . .

Yes, but what about 'the female of the species' being more vindictive than the male? And what about their notorious lack of logic, their action upon impulse, their substitution of intuition and instinct for pure reason?

That cut both ways, of course.

Any one of those four women would be just as likely to take the line of,

"Harmless-looking, pleasant-faced young man, of course he didn't do it. Don't care what they say,"

as she would be likely to take the line of,

"Poor young thing, cut off in her youth, poisoned and stuffed into a box and stuck up in an attic. Pretty girl, too. Of course he did it. Don't care what they say. Hang the wretch at once."

No, it wasn't theoretical generalities about the nature and character of women that were of

interest, so much as practical particularities about these four women.

This one was a plain grey-haired tired-looking woman of about fifty-five, untidily and tastelessly dressed in an expensive way.

She looked as though she had a large family, a disappointing husband, some dogs, political or municipal interests, and a good platform manner. She, too, would make up her mind, whether logically or intuitively, and stick to her decision, though it were contrary to that of the remaining eleven.

On her left sat another woman, bronze-haired, scarlet-lipped, carefully made up, of much the same age and social status, but of different type; much smarter, harder, less intelligent, more opinionated, and extremely annoyed at finding herself where she was.

She looked as though she had no family, an absentee husband, a lap-dog, purely "society" interests, and a fondness for bridge, cigarettes, cocktails and scandal.

Algernon Coxe felt he was probably doing her an injustice in deciding that she was quite prepared to have him hanged at once, as the cause of her being in that stuffy and objectionable place.

Beside her sat a man who, from the first, had intended to sit beside her. Or was it that she had intended him to sit beside her? Birds of a feather.

These two would feel between themselves a bond of sympathy ; fish out of water—the same water ; a common suffering would make them kin.

He was speaking to her : she answering. Algernon Coxe imagined their conversation to be :

" Boring."

" Ghastly."

" How long will it last ? "

" Oh, days."

" Hope they'll buck up about it."

" Not they. Law's delays."

" S'pose we can't ' record our vote ' and go."

" No such luck."

The sort of people who'd hang a man to get away to a bridge-party.

The fellow looked a typical club-window lounger—well-preserved ; hair laid out to the best advantage, a little going a long way ; clean shaven, monocled, full-lipped, pouchy-eyed.

Probably one might, without injustice, write him down as a soulless, selfish, sensual, *bon viveur*.

His neighbour was a fat man.

Simply a fat man, with a fat face consisting largely of fat cheeks ; a round orb in the midst of which lurked two piggy eyes, one piggy nose and two fat lips that constantly moved in and out as their owner breathed.

Algernon Coxe, studying him, decided that

his mind was as fat as his body and that he would wheeze

"Yussir" if the Foreman of the Jury asked him whether he thought the prisoner guilty, and wheeze

"Yussir" if the Foreman of the Jury asked him whether he thought the prisoner to be not guilty.

He would be all for 'armony, and agree with anybody about anythink. He wouldn't want to hang anybody, but the lor was the lor and the prisoner hadn't ought to of murdered the pore young thing, and whatever the Foreman of the Jury thought about it he was quite sure would be right, and he fully agreed.

Trial by one's peers!

Of what could this gross dull fellow be the judge, save of cheese, beer, steak, tripe, onions and shove-ha'penny?

Next to the man who looked both successful publican and jovial sinner sat a burly red-faced man with cropped grey hair, ragged grey moustache, rough heavy features and a look of resolution, directness and fearless honesty.

Carelessly dressed, ill-groomed, untidy and rugged-looking, he was indefinably a gentleman.

He would be patient, careful, slow, and, while fully admitting that he was stupid, demand to have everything clearly explained and then explained again. He would make up his mind

slowly, almost reluctantly, and nothing on earth would avail to make him change it.

Behind these two women and four men sat another row, consisting of two women and four men.

The first of these was a fair pretty woman of from thirty-five to forty, with a kindly, motherly, sensible face. Her large blue eyes looked gentle, pleasant, thoughtful, slightly wondering.

Algernon Coxe imagined her as happily married to a large affectionate man of wealth, position, and sporting proclivities. She would have two sons in the Sixth, or at the 'Varsity, and they would adore her and rag her unmercifully.

In her the quality of mercy would not be strained, but would drop as the gentle rain from Heaven upon the prisoner in the dock.

Next to her was the remaining woman. Indeed, she looked the prototype of the Remaining Woman. She might be anything between forty and fifty years of age, and her thin face expressed the unsocial attributes, bitterness, hardness and a weary scorn of things in general.

Algernon Coxe, studying her, gathered the impression of one who felt that the world had failed to appreciate her, had treated her ill.

Perhaps an unfortunate love affair ?

He would not have been surprised to learn that she had been a militant suffragette who

had much regretted the gaining of the franchise and the loss of excuse for further militancy; one who might have sat in great comfort at the feet of Miss Christabel Pankhurst.

As he watched her, she looked at him and, as their eyes met, the foolish idea came to him that this woman would willingly hang him because he was a man.

Beside this woman sat a tall old man, bald, clean-shaven save for a very tiny clipped moustache, bluish red cheeks and a prominent bluish red nose, in shape reminiscent of that of the Iron Duke. His myopic eyes, lack-lustre and suggestive of those of the tortoise, rested upon nothing with concentration, and betrayed no interest.

Upright, dapper and neat, he looked one of those self-respecting sterling, brainless people who daily do a foolish thing and never say a wise one.

The prisoner, whose life was in this man's hands, felt that at the end of the trial this worthy soul would still be wondering what it was all about, and would not be quite clear as to whether he had voted for death or deliverance.

Nay, it was entirely conceivable that, on returning to his home at Tooting, he would say to his plump and placid wife, the while she admitted that for once he had been somebody and done something:

" Upon me soul you couldn't tell which of 'em was which, bobbing up and down in that box and answering a lot of questions. I thought it was a red-headed fellow done it. He looked an artful member. I said to meself, ' That's the man,' I said, until I saw him get up and clear out of the Court . . ."

Trial by one's peers !

Beside this aged tortoise sat one whom Coxe's whimsical mind dubbed the aged hare, a loquacious, restless, self-important old man, much of whose extremely nasty face was fortunately hidden by a big dirty-white yellow-stained moustache and beard.

He evidently relished his position keenly and would talk of nothing but this trial and the great part he had played in it, for years to come.

His bored and weary family would have it for breakfast, dinner, tea and supper, until they knew it by heart ; and his public-house acquaintances would have it with every glass he stood them, until the day came when not even his beer would wash it down their throats again.

And with every telling he would say :

" It is a terrible thing to have the life of a fellow-creature in your hands. But I did my duty. I did my duty."

Algernon Coxe hated the man fiercely—his smug, unctuous face, his watery eyes, his shabby-

genteel get-up, between that of a cabman off duty and an extremely seedy something-in-the-city.

Ere looking at this fellow's neighbour, Coxe found himself imagining this man going, for the sake of an audience and a palaver, to the pastor of his chapel, and "unburdening his soul" as he would call it—telling him that he could not sleep at nights for thinking of the face of the man whom he had "hurled into eternity," or "cut off in the midst of his sins to stand before a Higher Tribunal."

Those were the kinds of expression he would use and enjoy, even as he was enjoying himself at this very moment. Loquacious, posturing humbug.

On the left of this person sat a long-lipped, big-chinned, middle-aged man in whose granite face gleamed a pair of the frostiest grey eyes. His hair was thin and sandy; his dress, neat and quiet, was bought for wear and not for show.

Sparing of gesture and miserly of speech, he either ignored the incessant chatter of the hoary hare or accorded him but almost imperceptible nods.

Solid, silent, slow and sure, he was, at a guess, a northerner, a successful manufacturer or man of business, retired from his bleak northern city. Possibly a Scots lawyer. Anyhow, a man with a mind of granite—a mind

from which ideas would be hewn rather than moulded, decisions that would be as statues in stone and not shapes of jelly.

On his left sat another silent man—silent from very boredom and resentment. A young, clean-shaven man who looked too youthful to be sitting on a jury and too superior to all human emotion to find either pity for the prisoner or horror at the deed of which he was accused.

As he considered the young man's haughty supercilious and arrogant face, Algernon Coxe suddenly remembered the wise words spoken by a languid character in *Bleak House* to Lady Dedlock and the guests assembled in her drawing-room :

" Better hang wrong f'ler than no f'ler."

And those were the twelve " good men and true " who were to try him for his life.

A man was speaking. A cruel-looking, thin-lipped man with heavy black eyebrows that met above the great thin high-bridged nose.

A little of his jet-black hair showed beneath his wig. He looked like a raven, a hawk. A vulture ? No, that was unfair. Rather an avenging angel, pitiless, ruthless—an angel of death.

This must be the Solicitor-General, Sir Henry Mackworth White, making his opening statement for the Crown.

" May it please your Lordship.

" Members of the Jury : Miss Giovanna Giulia Francesca Bianca Orsola Blayton, the daughter of the famous artist, Mr. James Augustus Blayton, was a brilliantly gifted and talented young lady, who followed in her father's footsteps.

" For about half the year she dwelt in Cornwall beneath his roof at a place called Polporth Cove. Here, within the shelter of his parental care, and under the protection of his watchful and guiding love, she lived an idyllic life as a member of a charming and delightful colony of talented and cultured men and women, many of whose names, like that of her father, are household words, known, admired and respected wherever the English tongue is spoken.

" To this lovely peaceful and Paradisial spot, on the second of August last, came the accused.

" By the end of the month of August when the time arrived for him to return to his home in London, he was the affianced husband of the murdered girl, recognized and accepted as such, though with considerable reluctance, by her father, Mr. James Augustus Blayton, who frankly did not like him and made no secret of the fact.

" In London the accused wrote daily to Miss Blayton letters of perfervid love, letters glowing with the intense passion which, at this period, he undoubtedly felt for the unfortunate

young girl so soon to meet, at his hands, her tragic end.

" As soon as Miss Blayton returned to the London flat that it was her habit to occupy while her father wintered abroad, the accused took her to visit his parents at Melfont Parva.

" But that visit was brief—brief ; and for this poor girl, unhappy.

" Why ?

" Because she was found unacceptable by the accused's parents.

" And again, why ?

" Why should this girl, young, beautiful, talented, charming, innocent, with character above reproach, daughter of a man as respected as he is famous, why, I ask, should she prove unacceptable to the parents of this man, her fiancé ?

" I will tell you, gentlemen of the Jury.

" It was because his parents had other views for him—other and more worldly, more materialistic views—and he was willing to accept them.

" You will learn that the comparatively penniless Miss Blayton had engaged herself to a man whose parents had already selected for him a wealthy wife.

" I do not say that anything had been definitely arranged, set down in black and white, openly talked about. I do not say that there

was any actual engagement between the accused and this wealthy woman at the time when he met Miss Blayton.

" But I do say that it was the intention of his parents that he should marry her, and that his announcement of his engagement to Miss Blayton, his bringing Miss Blayton to their house, precipitated this intention.

" I do not say, for I do not know and have no means of knowing, how far the wealthy woman, then Miss Agatha Sharp, was aware of, and consenting to, this intention, this scheme, this plot. But what we do know is that, within the brief space of a few short weeks, the accused, who brought Miss Blayton to his parents' house as his fiancée, left his parents' house with Miss Agatha Sharp as his wife.

" From that same house, beneath the roof of which this poor murdered girl so recently slept and dreamed innocent dreams of happiness and joy, this man was married to another woman, a rich woman, a great friend of his mother—married to her by his own father, in his father's church.

" But meantime what had happened ?

" The accused, at the suggestion of his mother, had broken off his engagement to Miss Blayton.

" For what reason ? The basest of all reasons. Greed of gold.

" Deafened by the urgings and pleadings of

his parents; blinded by the glitter of this gold; dumb before the hurt questioning and reproaches of the girl to whom he had solemnly plighted his troth, he did this mean and dastardly thing. He broke faith with the woman who adored him; he broke his word of honour and, gentlemen of the Jury, he broke a woman's heart.

"To marry money, he jilted this girl and showed himself the soulless, shameless cynic that he is.

"But, mark you, Miss Giovanna Blayton, young, innocent and simple though she was, could not be flung aside like a cast-off glove. She was a girl of spirit—and as the greatest of all poets has said, 'Hell hath no fury like a woman scorned.'

"Without for one moment suggesting that Miss Giovanna Blayton behaved like a fury, we may be fairly certain that this man had more than one extremely *mauvais quart d'heure.*

"There must have been scenes, reproaches, recriminations. Not the very sweetest and gentlest of women will accept the deadliest and cruellest of insults without a protest.

"A woman who did that would be something higher than an angel or lower than a worm, for even a worm will turn.

"Miss Blayton was neither; she was a

woman, a sweet good gentlewoman, but she was a woman wronged, a woman scorned.

" And, mark this, gentlemen of the Jury, she was half Italian—and Italian blood is not sluggish in response to insult and injury. Nor need I tell you, men of the world, men of culture and education, that the Italians themselves have a proverb which is of peculiar and particular application in this case. As you will have guessed, the proverb to which I allude runs :

' L'inglese italianato
È il diavolo incarnato.'

" Precisely. An Italianate Englishman is a devil incarnate.

" Now, again without for one moment suggesting that Miss Blayton, an Italianate Englishwoman, was a devil incarnate, I do invite you still further to consider the effect, upon such a woman, of such treatment as she received at the hands of the prisoner in the dock.

" Imagine the reaction of such a nature as hers to such insolent cruelty, such barefaced impudent outrage, such insulting and disgracing injury.

" Is it not absolutely certain that when she recovered from the numbing shock of discovering that her lover was a perjured callous scoundrel, she would be filled with that anger and resentment which are the mother and the father of the desire for vengeance ?

" It is as certain as that night will follow day.

" But if I use the word ' vengeance,' do not misunderstand me. Perhaps I should have said punishment, retaliation, compensation. Possibly these words convey my meaning better.

" She, a woman wronged, a woman scorned, were she English or Italian, or half English and half Italian, would, as Love—shocked, wounded, betrayed and slaughtered—died in her heart and its corpse putrified to hatred—she would, I say, give expression to that hatred.

" She would threaten.

" She would act.

" She might be content to invoke the social law that ostracizes the perpetrators of such crimes.

" On the other hand it is quite likely, nay more than likely, that she would feel it her duty to invoke the actual Law, the Law that so rightly and justly punishes, and severely punishes, all wilful and wicked breach of contract.

" Be that as it may. We do not know what she threatened, or what she purposed doing.

" What we do know, gentlemen of the Jury, is that she did not live to carry out her threat. She did not live to do what she had purposed.

" She was murdered, and her murdered body was found in a steel box, hidden—where ?

" *In the house of the accused.*"

The speaker paused dramatically, and pointed at Algernon Coxe toward whom the faces of the Jury were, with one accord, immediately turned and, with one or two exceptions, expressed a heavy and accusing disapproval combined with a morbid curiosity and strong distaste.

Algernon Coxe caught the eye of the Foreman of the Jury who, with pursed protruding lips and frowning brow, was looking at him as many a time he had probably looked at sailors brought up before him by the master-at-arms. He seemed to be weighing the accusation against the appearance of the accused, and to suspend judgment.

The tired-looking woman seated next to him seemed to be saying

"Is it possible?" as she scanned his face.

Her bronze-haired neighbour looked bored and disgusted with things in general and himself in particular, a look that was repeated on the face of the club-window lounger beside her.

The fat man stared as he would have stared at any other show. It would not be easy for his face to achieve any expression whatsoever, and if it did, it would surely be a long and difficult business to change it. But, on the whole, an acute observer might decide that the show at which the fat man now stared was a nasty one.

The burly red-faced man looked as though

the story told by the prosecuting Counsel disgusted him, though he had not yet accepted it as true. Like the Foreman and the tired woman, he appeared to reserve judgment.

Looking along the second row of faces, Coxe saw, with a sense of unutterable gratitude, that the fair pretty woman was regarding him with a look that was definitely kindly and encouraging. Though she did not actually smile or endeavour to convey any kind of message, her face bore an unmistakable expression of

"I don't believe a word of it."

"I would like to kiss her shoes," thought Algernon Coxe.

The Remaining Woman, on the contrary, glared at him with a look of positive hatred and complete condemnation.

It seemed to Coxe that, in addition to morbid curiosity, disapproval and distaste, her face expressed a ghoulish gloating, a dreadful anticipatory joy. He fervently hoped that for his own sake and that of humanity in general, he misjudged this woman.

Her tortoise-like neighbour, the tall old man, was turning his noble nose and lack-lustre eyes toward the ceiling. His mouth was open. Doubtless also his mind, or the place where his mind should have been.

The bearded goat-faced ancient, whom Coxe had mentally called The Aged Hare, had,

judging by his expression, already tried, condemned, hanged, drawn and quartered the prisoner.

He looked ferocious, triumphant, vengeful; and, beneath his tobacco-stained moustache and ragged beard, his lips worked and his jaws champed hungrily, as though he anticipated devouring as well as torturing and slaying the unspeakable villain who polluted the atmosphere that this bulwark of justice breathed.

Beside him, the long-lipped big-chinned man from the North stared impassive.

What he had heard had not given him a favourable, nor an unfavourable, impression. He bided his time.

The twelfth man deigned to turn his eyes upon Algernon Coxe. He gazed upon the prisoner in the dock as he would have gazed upon the maggot in the walnut. His face expressed contemptuous disgust. But this was of less interest inasmuch as his face had expressed contemptuous disgust before the trial began, and expressed it in equal measure whether turned upon the prisoner, the Jury, Counsel or the Judge.

Algernon Coxe looked up at the crowded gallery and saw much the same general expression upon the faces there.

A composite face, he felt, would have shown a gloating morbid curiosity, dislike and, on

the whole, a condemnatory disapproval. He had a vision of an arena, a vast crowd—and thumbs turned down.

His eyes fell and for the first time he looked at his mother.

Large, upright, imposing, clad wholly in black, her sombre figure was a monument of grief, of pain personified.

Her face, terribly aged, bore an expression of sorrow and suffering bravely borne, of courage in the cruellest adversity. Her womanly brow consented to grief but conquered agony. Neither broken nor bowed, she showed the mettle of her pastures, the value of her faith, and the courage of her conviction that she would be justified thereof.

Beside her, her husband swung his foot and gazed at it and at nothing else.

Poor souls, how they must be suffering in this dull and dingy place, this ill-lit and ill-omened haunt of sorrow, sin and shame. Oh, how unutterably and vilely he had shown his immeasurable unworthiness of such parents . . .

What was the lawyer fellow saying? He had missed a lot of it.

"We thus have, gentlemen of the Jury, the prisoner's motive—if it were he who killed Giovanna Blayton—for this exceedingly deliberate cruel and callous murder. It was the

desire to be rid of the obstacle in his path to wealth, and his added desire, nay urgent need, to be rid of a menace to his social security, his reputation and his good name . . .

" How many times he visited this unfortunate girl's flat we do not know. But what we do know is that *he was there on the day that she disappeared.*

" Witnesses will be called to prove that the accused, who appeared to be in a state of considerable agitation, came to the house at least twice on that day ; that he called a taxi and removed the box in which her body was concealed, and took it to his own house.

" He then returned to the flat, dismissed the charwoman and locked the place up.

" While in the flat he informed at least three people that Miss Blayton had gone away—gone right away—gone away for a long time—and that he did not know when she would return.

" You will also hear the evidence of the Senior Pathologist to the Home Office, who made a post-mortem examination of the body of the deceased and found not merely signs of poisoning, but absolute and incontestable proof that this poor girl had met her death by poisoning.

" Gentlemen of the Jury, Giovanna Blayton was poisoned by means of cyanide of potassium. Her body was found in the accused's house.

He had every reason for wishing to get her out of his way. He is an amateur photographer who uses cyanide of potassium constantly and, as will be shown, a wine-glass bearing his finger-prints and those of the murdered girl, was found on the table in Giovanna Blayton's flat.

"The question probably at once arises in your minds as to how the accused, if he did murder her, induced his victim to take this poison.

"I will tell you something interesting—something that has a most sinister bearing upon this problem.

"Cyanide of potassium, also called hydrocyanic acid and, more familiarly, prussic acid, has an odour and a flavour of almonds.

"Now notice. On the sideboard in the dining-room of the flat stood two bottles of liqueur, one of them being that bright green concoction known as *Crême de Menthe* which has a strong flavour of peppermint, and the other being a cherry-coloured liqueur known as *Crême de Noyeau*.

"*Crême de Noyeau*, gentlemen of the Jury, has a strong odour and flavour of *almonds*.

"Can there be any doubt in the minds of reasonable men and women that the cyanide of potassium, with which deceased was poisoned, was administered in this liqueur, of which the

odour and flavour are identical with those of the fatal drug ?

" It would be the easiest thing in the world for the murderer to drop poison, whether from a phial or in tablet form, into the wine-glass from which his victim was about to drink.

" He would go to the sideboard, take out a couple of the smallest glasses there—wine-glasses—half fill each of them with the almond-flavoured liqueur and, while he stood between his victim and the glasses, he would poison one of them and take it to her.

" Or it may have been done when her back was turned. It would be only too easy to draw her attention to something in the street, to ask her to get a certain book, to suggest something which would cause her to go into the next room. Which of these things he did, we do not know.

" What we do know is that she drank the poisoned liqueur—quite probably at a draught.

" And this drug, as you are well aware, is of the most intensely poisonous type. One single drop of it, if swallowed, causes almost instantaneous death through stoppage of the heart.

" Gentlemen of the Jury, the prosecution alleges, and will proceed to prove, that the prisoner in the dock administered prussic acid to Giovanna Blayton, thrust her dead body into her own trunk, which stood empty in the bedroom, and removed it to his own house—

obviously with a view to its final disposal at the earliest opportunity that presented itself.

"What other solution of the mystery is possible; what other theory tenable?

"In a statement to the police, the accused puts forward a tale which, were not the circumstances so tragic and so terrible, would be extremely amusing, so futile and so foolish is his story, so thin his explanation.

"According to this statement, he had not seen Miss Giovanna Blayton for some days before the date on which he removed the box containing her body from the flat.

"He fully admits, mark you, that there had been what he describes as terrible scenes between him and the girl whom he had so brutally and callously jilted.

"Had this poor girl been murdered by violence instead of by poisoning; had she been struck down by a blow delivered with some weapon of offence—such as a poker, or a heavy walking-stick, hastily snatched up in a fit of temper—there might possibly be the extenuating plea of sudden blind rage, the defence that there was not the slightest thought or intention of murder . . .

"'I struck her—but I did not mean to hurt her, much less to kill her.'"

"Had the victim been shot or stabbed and the prisoner been in the habit of carrying pistol

or knife, a plea in mitigation might still be put forward . . .

" ' We quarrelled. The quarrel became violent. We were both beside ourselves with rage and anger. I went mad. I didn't know what I was doing ' . . .

" But can any such plea be put forward in the case of that most dreadful, most callous, most calculating form of crime—murder by poisoning?

" Here is premeditation in its most pronounced, its most vile, its most horrible and revolting manifestation—calculated, cold, and deliberate.

" In this country, happily, it is a rare thing for a man to carry a lethal weapon. Very few Englishmen go about with pistols in their hip-pockets or hidden knives in their belts. How many habitually carry poisons concealed about their person?

" I suggest to you, gentlemen of the Jury, that the accused went to the house of the deceased with a most deadly poison in his possession. He went, I say, with the fullest intention of committing murder, murder most foul, premeditated and arranged . . ."

Algernon Coxe was aware that he had yawned heavily and that at the very moment of his doing so, prosecuting Counsel had pointed at the prisoner, directing the eyes of the Jury from himself to the dock. He felt that the Jury as

a body was most unfavourably impressed by his yawn, which they must consider to be either a lamentable exhibition of brutal indifference and callous levity, or else a piece of impudent bravado.

But how were they to know that he had not slept for three nights, that great bells were clanging in his head, that he wished he could fall into the sweet deep sleep of death, and that they were entirely welcome to hang him if they would only do so at once.

Let that grim Judge up there or that talking fellow who was earning his living by trying to weave a noose about a fellow-creature's neck, or any of those men and women of the Jury, have three consecutive sleepless nights—and see whether they would yawn when treacherous sleep at last approached.

Why is it that one can always sleep when one must not do so?

For weeks, now, he could sleep anywhen and anywhere, except at night and in bed and when he was alone in his cell. He could sleep here in the prisoner's dock, or in the room where the lawyers badgered him and people visited him . . .

. . . There was that police fellow again. What a thrice-told tale it all was.

Yet another policeman . . .

A heavy lethargy. Could one have been sleeping, bolt upright like this? Could one sleep with one's eyes wide open?

Presumably, for the policeman had vanished and a bald-headed fellow was talking about "the contents of the stomach" . . . "organs" . . . Beastly.

What a game it was! Catch-ball. Tossing the ball carefully to each other, to and fro. Those two understood each other, that prosecuting Counsel and this analyst . . .

Why, here was the taxi-driver. How incongruous he looked. He'd have been more comfortable if they'd fixed a driving-wheel on the edge of the witness-box and given him a seat behind it.

'Laughter in Court,' as the papers said.

"Ar, guv'nor. I said to 'im 'You'll fall through the bottom of this keb,' I said, 'before that there box'll fall off the back of it. Yer whiskers'll grow and cover the floor and go under the door, before that box'll fall off,' I said . . .

"Ar, that's right. Very particler 'e was about it bein' safe.

"'Eavy! I should sye so . . .

"Ar, I did . . . Cloves, 'e *said* it was . . .

"Yus, right up to the top o' the 'ouse, 'im and me . . .

"Ar, that's right, sir. A very 'andsome tip

indeed. A perfect gent . . . Intended to bribe me to keep me mouf shut? I wouldn't go so fur as to say *that*, I wouldn't . . . Yus—you might go fer to call it a most unusual 'andsome tip for liftin' a box upstairs . . ."

Algernon Coxe yawned again and with a shivering shudder, pulled himself together.

Who was this? He seemed to know the girl's face, but to save his life, he couldn't say when and where he had seen her. She seemed to remember well enough, however.

Oh, he had 'seemed thoroughly distraught' on this occasion, had he? 'Very strange indeed in his manner. Had not seemed to understand what she was saying to him. Had told her that Miss Blayton had gone away, gone extremely suddenly. Apparently he knew all this, though nobody else knew it, but hadn't the slightest idea where she'd gone or when she'd be returning' . . .

The girl seemed quite vindictive about it . . .

Who would they bring to attack him next?

At the end of this dreadful day, Algernon Coxe wondered whether he could really survive another such.

CHAPTER XI

THE following night, Doctor John Desart, sitting solitary in his library, once again pondered the possibilities of saving Algernon Coxe. He would do his ultimate utmost best, short of perjury.

But of what real value would that best be, even under the wonderfully clever cross-examination of Sir Everard Witherby, the Counsel for the Defence?

What could Sir Everard Witherby bring out, except that Algernon had always been a youth of blameless life, a model of propriety and virtue? And that might not sound too well; might prejudice the jury against him. Quite as likely as not, some of them would say:

"Ah, yes, we know *that* sort . . . Still waters run deep . . . They're the worst of all when they do cut loose."

He had had a hope when this French Russian Pole or whatever he was, had appeared on the scene, but that had been quenched by Algernon's own voluntary statement that he himself had fetched the box from Giovanna's flat, and that

Giovanna herself had written—in her own handwriting about which there could be no mistake—asking him to come for the box. And had sent him the keys of the box.

How very thin that story sounded.

It almost put the noose about the boy's neck, inasmuch as it put Boris Goudroff and everybody else clean out of court. If Algernon had himself brought the body to his house, who but Algernon would be the murderer?

And how could anybody but Algernon have murdered Giovanna, *if* Giovanna had sent him that letter? If it had been typed, and the signature forged, it might have been part of an extremely clever ruse for shifting the blame from the shoulders of the real murderer on to those of an innocent man.

The doctor endeavoured to reconstruct the crime as, in those circumstances, it might have been perpetrated.

One. This Boris Goudroff, or some other ruffian, is murderously mad with jealousy because Giovanna has Algernon at her flat, and is going to marry him.

Two. The infuriated brute decides that if he cannot have Giovanna, nobody else shall; and, partly under the influence of that determination, partly in revenge upon both her and Algernon, considers ways and means of killing her without endangering his own unclean neck.

Three. Being a subtle-minded and scheming scoundrel, he hits upon what appears to him to be the magnificently brilliant idea of not only killing the girl, to punish both her and her lover, but of actually getting the lover himself hanged for the murder of his adored sweetheart!

Two birds with one stone.

How such a creature would smack his lips and rub his hands, over so absolutely priceless a consummation. Something like a really perfect revenge.

So what does he do?

He gets some cyanide of potassium from Paris or Soho or Jericho and has the minor, and —if less brilliant, still bright—idea of putting it into the almond-tasting liqueur which she is in the habit of drinking.

He then types a letter, as from Giovanna, asking Algernon to mind a trunk for her, and to come and fetch it from her flat on a certain day at a certain hour. He posts the two keys of the box at the same time.

On the previous night, he poisons Giovanna and puts her body into the box.

Algernon falls into the trap and, in all good faith, comes and fetches the box and keeps it in his lumber-room, there to remain until Giovanna asks him to return it to her.

Why not?

Perfectly simple.

But Algernon swears that the letter was written by Giovanna herself, from beginning to end; and that there could not be the faintest shadow of doubt as to its authenticity.

So that was that.

But then again, many and many an innocent fool has, in his fear of being punished for what he has not done, made *too* good a defence. And poor Algernon had had a wonderful training in making a good defence when accused of wrong-doing. It was indeed a marvel that his mother had not succeeded in making an arrant liar of him. It might be that in his fear and innocence he had over-done it and tried to prove too much.

There was that case, of course, of the man, who, accused of the murder of his sweetheart in Perth, swore—producing witnesses—that at the hour when the murder must have been committed, he was in Edinburgh. A perfect alibi, the best of all proofs of innocence, was to be his defence and salvation.

But unfortunately the alibi had failed, and all that he had really proved was that he, his brother, and a very old friend, were three perjurers together.

It being proved that he undeniably was in the neighbourhood of the girl's house in Perth on the day of the murder, he was found guilty

and hanged. The real murderer confessed later, when dying.

Had the poor fool not attempted so good a defence, and shown himself a terrified and desperate perjurer, the Scots jury would have given the accused the benefit of the doubt that undeniably existed, and would have brought in a verdict of Not Proven.

Was it probable that Algernon was innocent, but had actually invented this story about a letter to strengthen his case?

It was certainly possible.

He might have been rung-up that night, and a voice, which he took to be Giovanna's, might have asked him to come for the box in the morning. He might have agreed and, in complete innocence, done exactly as he was asked.

But then again, how could Boris Goudroff, or any other man, simulate the voice of Giovanna Blayton sufficiently well to deceive Algernon who loved it and knew its every inflexion?

Goudroff might have had a female accomplice, of course. But was this going rather beyond the bounds of reasonable probability, if not possibility?

No. What is impossible in human nature? What wildest detective-thriller exceeded the improbabilities or impossibilities of the actual facts of real murders and other crimes?

And supposing Algernon had been deceived

over the telephone, as was just possible, would he go and invent the whole story of receiving a letter?

It was quite possible. Anything was quite possible.

It's absurd to say that innocent people never look guilty—never blush and look unconvincing liars when speaking the simple truth. Poor Algernon, if innocent, might have felt that, the corpse being found in his house, things looked so black against him that he must bolster up the truth, add to the truth, and swear to something concrete and tangible—such as an actual letter.

Psychologically speaking, it was quite sound and sensible to assume that an innocent man, with no shred of evidence to help him, might well prefer to swear to a non-existent letter than to a real voice.

A letter is a concrete thing; to him it would be a symbol of solidity and reality.

And if, on the other hand, Algernon were guilty, as, one must admit, it certainly appeared, his defence was an ingenious one.

Very thin, but distinctly ingenious.

Far too ingenious, in fact, for poor Algernon Coxe.

And yet one never knew. If there were one thing in this world—except death and taxes—that was certain, it was the utter uncertainty

of things. If there were one thing that a Harley Street neurologist really learned, it was to be surprised at nothing ; to be surprised at no one.

But, if Doctor John Desart still had left any capacity for surprise ; if ever in his life he were to say :

" Well, I *am* surprised," surely this was the occasion.

Gentle, simple, honest, lovable Algernon Dashwood Coxe being tried for his life as the murderer of Giovanna Blayton whom he loved !

The doctor sighed heavily, and sank deeper into his chair, his hand across his closed eyes.

What a world it was, with its sin and sorrow and suffering. And what an enormous amount of that sorrow and suffering was attributable to its sin. Nine-tenths of the people who came to him were ill by reason of their sins, or the sin and folly of their parents and ancestors.

What *was* sin ?

Did an anthropomorphous Deity, inhabiting some distant and inaccessible Universe, make an arbitrary list of human activities and say :

" These are labelled ' *Sins* ' ; do not do them ? . . ."

' *The crimes of Clapham chaste in Martaban.*'

Sin a matter of latitude and longitude ?

Sin a matter of bulk, wholesale or retail ?

Praiseworthy, in time of war, to kill wholesale, with a machine-gun, men who have done

you no harm; infamous in time of peace, to kill, with a pistol, the man who has done you the deadliest injury?

Could a man on a desert island sin? There was no-one against whom he could sin. Against God? Did an omnipotent, omniscient Deity really care what a poor human worm on a desert island said or thought about Him? If he said it he might not mean it, and if he thought it he couldn't help it . . .

The doctor's head nodded, for he was very tired. Pulling himself together, he sat upright and told himself to go to bed . . .

Sin? The world's problem, and akin to the problem of Pain. But the one is a variable and the other a constant . . .

Nevertheless, the fact remained that, whatever Sin may be, sorrow and suffering do inevitably follow it.

Where was the sin in this instance, assuming for the moment, that Algernon Coxe was innocent?

Undoubtedly in his overbearing, selfish, self-righteous mother's unwarrantable interference.

Not merely this last insufferable interference with her son's engagement to Giovanna, her presumptuous and impudent meddling in this case of natural selection; her insolent arrogant intrusion and intervention in a grown man's perfectly commendable and desirable love-affair

. . . but her habitual relentless interference with the whole of his mind and thought and will; with his right, proper and natural doings throughout his whole life; his very personality, soul and self.

From his cradle she had dammed up, thwarted and repressed his life-force, his *élan vital*, his every effort and attempt at natural self-expression.

Algernon, as a child, would undoubtedly have been a splendid little chap if this abominable woman had let him alone and allowed him to be one—in spite of his being the son of Clarence Coxe.

But she, her husband's cousin, was a Coxe too, and she, good Lord! had energy, brains, determination and enterprise enough for half a dozen.

Why couldn't she have developed all of herself that was in Algernon, and have allowed him to grow up a man?

Anyone could see that he was a Coxe, but he wasn't a Clarence Coxe by any means.

It was she who ought to be in the dock, not Algernon.

It was her sin for which he was suffering. Who but she had made him the vacillating weakling that *would* give up his adored sweetheart because his mother told him to do so? And who but she had then come between them?

But for her, they would have been happily married by now. And Algernon's cure would have begun . . . Giovanna would have developed in him all the manhood, personality, enterprise and initiative that his own mother had thwarted and suppressed.

Sorrow and suffering following Sin. A pity that it wasn't invariably the sinner who got the suffering and the sorrow.

Not but what Minerva Coxe had now brought plenty of it on her own head. Still, it wasn't she who stood in the prisoner's dock. It was not for her that the door of the condemned cell stood open; not above her head that the hangman's rope dangled.

Yes, if Algernon Coxe were a murderer, the guilt was hers. And if he were innocent? . . . It was too appalling to contemplate.

John Desart arose, yawning, to go to bed.

The door of the room opened.

"A lady to see you, sir," said the parlour-maid.

"Well, she cannot see me at this time of night, as you know perfectly well, Matthews."

"Yes, sir, that's what I told her, sir, and she said she'd knock and ring and knock and ring until you did see her. She said she'd stay on the doorstep . . ."

"All night," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe over

the maid's shoulder. "I knew perfectly well that you'd see me, Doctor. I followed her in."

"All right, Matthews," said the doctor, and the maid retired, closing the door behind Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"Why didn't you telephone?" he continued, turning to his visitor. "In the circumstances, I should of course have seen you, at any time of the day or night . . ."

"I wasn't taking any chances. They'd have said you were out," replied Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"Fresh developments since I saw you this morning?" enquired the doctor.

"No, but . . . I've come to ask a favour of you, Doctor . . . I know you'd do anything you could to help me."

"I would do anything I could to help Algernon," observed the doctor gravely.

"Then go into the witness-box and *swear he's insane;* swear that he has always been liable to do something abnormal, and has often had lapses of memory and of moral control . . . not responsible for his actions . . . homicidal maniac, if you like—but *save* him. Save us from the appalling, the unspeakable, disgrace of his being hanged . . .

"I could not bear it. It would kill me. Doctor, swear he's *insane*—always has been insane. You'll do that for me, won't you? You said you'd do anything you could . . ."

"And so I will, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," replied John Desart very gravely. "I will do any mortal thing that I can."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe threw out her arms, almost as though about to embrace John Desart.

"Oh, Doctor, God bless . . ."

"Anything that I can," repeated John Desart slowly, "but *that* I cannot do. I am not a liar and a perjurer. I cannot, and I will not, go into the witness-box and swear upon the Bible that your son is insane."

"You can! You *can*! You *must*!" cried the woman, as nearly distraught as it was in the nature of Minerva Coxe to be.

"Algernon is as sane as you or I," was the cold reply. "And I will not state that he is insane . . . neither in the witness-box on my Bible oath, nor in simple statement to your solicitor or anybody else."

"Doctor, Doctor, I will go on my knees to you! . . . Oh, save me, save me . . . You've always been fond of him . . . You've known him all his life . . . You grew up with his father . . . You were at school with his father.

"You *were* at school with his father," she repeated.

"Algernon is, was, and always has been, perfectly sane, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," replied John Desart.

"I know! I know! Of course he is. What else should the son of his parents be, but sane? . . . I'm asking you to *save* him . . . Have you never told a lie in your life, Doctor Desart? Of course you have. Even *I* have, myself. And if you could tell a lie over a small matter, cannot you tell one to save a life? To save the boy you're so fond of? To save me from a public disgrace and shame I shall never get over? To do a great right, cannot you do a little wrong?"

"A *little* wrong? Perjury? I hate to hear people talk about their conscience, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, but I must mention that I have one, both professional and private, in fact . . . I will not go into the witness-box and swear that Algernon is, or was, or ever has been, insane."

"You'd let this happen for the sake of your precious conscience, your professional conscience? You'd let my boy be hanged, and you'd bring me to the lowest depths of ignominy and shameful disgrace?"

"'*Magna est veritas et praevalebit,*'" said John Desart. "Lies are not necessary for the salvation of the innocent."

"But he isn't innocent, Doctor! . . . How could he be—after a terrific quarrel, a fight in fact, and his scornful rejection of her lewd advances and vile temptations . . . Her murdered body actually concealed in his house . . .

Don't let's beat about the bush . . . Of course he murdered her . . . It isn't for *us* to pretend to each other now, but to think how we can save him . . . And you can, at any rate, save him from being hanged. The shame and disgrace would be infinitely less if he were found 'insane and to be detained during the King's pleasure.' "

" You'd rather have him alive in Broadmoor Prison—as sane as you or I—and in fullest possession of all his faculties, would you? In prison *for life*, eh? With criminal lunatics? "

" Oh, yes, Doctor, a thousand times."

" Imprisoned for life—innocent—perfectly sane—with criminal *lunatics*, eh? "

" Surely anything is better than death on the scaffold? Doctor, I couldn't *bear* it."

" But you aren't asked to bear it. It's Algernon who . . ."

" The disgrace, I mean. I simply could not bear it . . . There is no real disgrace attaching to insanity. It is not a crime . . . Of course, a verdict of insanity, and life at Broadmoor, would be better than death on the scaffold."

" Have you obtained Algernon's views on that point? "

" No, but Algernon would do as . . ."

" Stop," interrupted the doctor, sternly.

" For God's sake, don't tell me *now* that Algernon will do as you tell him! Isn't the

poor lad where he is at this moment, simply and solely through doing as you've told him, and through being brought up all his life to think what you think and say what you say, and to do what you want done ? "

" Doctor Desart, you always were, and I suppose always will be, the most unfair, unjust and wrong-headed man alive. Hasn't everything that I've done, been for Algernon's good ? Didn't he go astray the moment he left home and came to live in London—more or less in *your* charge ? It's *you* who are responsible, *you* who are to blame."

Doctor Desart smiled a little wearily.

" Yes, you may smile, but facts are facts. The boy is to blame, of course, for giving way to temper and acting like a savage and a brute, but who led him into such courses ? Who sent him to Polporth Cove ? Who threw him in the way of this girl, and encouraged the intrigue ? Who actually encouraged the girl herself to run after my son ? "

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe paused for breath, and Doctor Desart regarded her with renewed interest.

What a priceless psychological study this woman was . . .

" Yes," continued Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, warming to her work, though still dignified and stately, if not calm.

" Yes, and who, in the very first instance, put into Algernon's head this idiotic and disgusting idea of finding a wife? A foolish and innocent boy like that—with a wife! Hadn't he a mother to look after him and manage his house? Why on earth should he be supposed to need a wife? It was you, and you alone, who put the notion into his head.

" And supposing for one moment that he had wanted a wife, who was the proper person to find one for him, you or I, his own mother?

" But for you, the idea of *women* would never have entered his innocent head. And now you actually have the incredible brazen impudence to blame me. *Me*, his mother, the one friend who tried to save him from the immoral adventuress with whom your wicked folly had saddled him! . . . You'd blame *me!* How like a *man*, isn't it? . . .

" And having brought the boy to the very foot of the gallows, and having tried to blame his mother for what you have done, you calmly refuse to lift a finger to help."

John Desart, making every allowance, merely sighed.

" Tell me of any conceivable thing that I can do, and I will do it," said he. " You may rule out perjury."

" Yes, I may rule out anything that would help me, may I not? Of course . . ."

Suddenly Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe fell silent. A vivid memory had been cast up from the depths of her subconscious mind.

She could see herself sitting face to face with this man, years ago, in this very house, just as she was doing now. She could hear her own voice saying in tones of expostulation:

"Mental condition, my good man? You talk as though the poor boy were an idiot."

And she could hear this man's reply, as plainly as though he were speaking now:

"Oh, we're all insane on some points."

Yes, and on that she had cried:

"My son *insane*? *My* son!"

And this so-called doctor had most certainly answered:

"He has a long way to go before he has a sane outlook on life."

As suddenly as she had fallen silent, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe burst once more into speech.

"And where does the perjury come in, pray? Didn't you, in this very house, tell me, years ago, that the boy even then had a long way to go before he had a sane outlook on life?"

"Quite probably," replied John Desart. "It would most certainly have been true, anyhow."

"Very well, then . . ."

"But that," continued the doctor, "is a

wholly different thing from being insane. Any person, for example, who is very ill from any disease whatsoever, has a long way to go before he has a sane outlook on life. The body must be healthy before the mind can be quite healthy. No one who is badly worried, fatigued, overwrought, anxious, frightened, ill, or upset in any way, has a normal outlook on life. Hence the great proportion of suicides, due solely to one of these causes. The suicide's outlook on life was abnormal and, had he not killed himself, he would have had a long way to go before he had a sane outlook on life."

"Yes, very well," agreed Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. "Exactly. And what is the inevitable and unvarying verdict at the Coroner's inquest? 'Suicide while temporarily *insane*.'"

"The emphasis is on '*temporarily*,' Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe," pointed out the doctor.

"Well, then, was not Algernon temporarily insane?"

"All murderers are temporarily insane," answered the doctor. "Insane with rage; insane with jealousy, greed, revenge, fear, hatred, lust, or some such passion. It is clearly arguable that to be a murderer is to be temporarily insane. But it avails him nothing in a Court of Law. The view taken by the law—and very rightly—is that a man must curb and control the passions that lead

to murder; not give way to them to the point of temporary insanity."

"To which of these passions do you suppose Algernon gave way, Doctor Desart?" asked Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"If Algernon murdered Giovanna, I should say that he did it under the influence of mixed emotions, in which rage at her stinging scorn, and a despairing sense of his impotence, against *you* and the forces of circumstance and of life, predominated . . . Also jealousy . . . And an utterly unbearable hatred of himself and his conduct in jilting her . . . For, murderer or not, Algernon was a sensitive-minded honourable gentleman, and loathed himself for doing what you made him do to Giovanna—jilt her and break her heart.

"But he's not a murderer," he continued.

"Very well, then, save him," urged Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe again. "You believe he's innocent. Save him, then, I say. Swear that he was insane from childhood. You've been his doctor all his life. I've constantly had to bring him to you. Doesn't that show there was something wrong? Of course he was insane, and you know it. You've always disliked me and you feel that now's your chance to . . ."

"Hush," interrupted John Desart. "You don't mean it; so don't say it."

"Very well then, help me, I tell you. You've

only to say that Algernon has been in your hands from babyhood and has never been normal. Of course he was insane. Insane from the time he could talk. Why—look at that absurd nightmare he has always had. I told you about it years and years ago. He screamed about that box from the time he could say the word 'box.'"

"Yes," agreed John Desart, "and that is the most amazing phenomenon that I've come across in all my personal experience and my reading and research. . . . It doesn't tally. . . . The symbolism doesn't apply. . . . He certainly had no signs whatever of claustrophobia. The box was a terror and horror to him from babyhood, but so far as I could see, it had no application, no significance. . . ."

"It was prophetic, of course—a warning," Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe informed him.

"Well, we psychologists don't regard dreams as prophetic, nor do we deal in supernatural 'warnings,'" replied the doctor.

"We regard dreams as cartoons, so to speak, sketched by the unconscious mind for the instruction and guidance of the conscious mind; the drawback being that, as a rule, the conscious mind is unaware of the fact, and would not have the vaguest idea of what the subconscious mind was driving at, if it were aware.

"And I cannot for the life of me, see what

message Algernon's subconscious mind was trying to convey through the symbolism of a closed box of unknown contents. Nor can I see the faintest reason why the dream should take the form of a nightmare.

"I can understand some secretive, silent, powerfully self-repressed man dreaming about a closed box because his subconscious mind wished to deride and reprove him, and to point out to him that he was more like a walking coffer or coffin than a man. . . . It wouldn't be a nightmare though, and he wouldn't be likely to dream it more than once or twice. But there was nothing of the stern, silent, strong and secretive man about poor Algernon. He . . ."

"It was prophetic," asserted Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe again, "and it was a warning against Giovanna Blayton. It was her box, of course."

"Oh? And he dreamed about Giovanna Blayton's box twenty years before she came into his life, you think?" enquired the doctor, politely.

"Yes, it was a warning from God."

"It's an amazing, astounding and unique phenomenon, anyhow," said the doctor, "but how it was to help poor Algernon, one fails to see."

"And how *you* are going to help poor Algernon—and me—one fails to see, unless you'll do as I ask," said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe.

"How you can refuse, how you can hesitate for one moment, I can't understand. The boy's life in the balance—and you pretend to be fond of him! And even if you really thought he was not insane, you can't be sure . . .

"And another thing. Have you forgotten that awful dream he had—the one in which he dreamed he had poisoned me? There you are again, you see. There it is, as plain as a pike-staff. What was *that* but homicidal mania?"

"It was anything but homicidal mania," replied John Desart.

"And pray what was it, then?"

"Well, since you ask, it was a recognized and perfectly common phenomenon associated with what is termed a mother-complex."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe snorted.

"A mother-complex," repeated the doctor. "Your son's subconscious mind loathed and detested you."

"My son loathed and detested me!" said Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, rising from her seat.

"I didn't say so," replied the doctor. "I said his subconscious mind. Had anybody asked Algernon, he would probably, in all good faith, have told them that he loved you most dearly; but his unconscious mind most certainly did not. Hence the dream—a wish-fulfilment dream."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe looked, for her, a little bewildered.

"I don't understand this 'subconscious mind' business," she said.

"Nor do I," replied Doctor Desart. "I wish I did."

"A farrago of nonsense!" Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe disposed of the subconscious mind.

"And it seems to me there's a great deal of what looks uncommonly like prevarication and evasion and excuse-making about this dragging in of this supposititious and nonsensical invention that you call the 'unconscious mind.' The plain fact remains that Algernon, who poisoned this girl, used to dream of poisoning his own mother. What's *that* but abnormal and insane? . . . Or am I to understand that you consider it a perfectly sane and normal thing, for only sons to contemplate poisoning their mothers?"

"It is a recognized and usual—and therefore normal—feature in cases of a mother-complex or a father-complex," replied the doctor, "and means nothing more than that, subconsciously and quite unconsciously, the victim detests the person dreamed about. Many a boy who would unhesitatingly risk his life to save his father, whom he believes he loves, dreams that he has killed him. If he went mad, which means if his unconscious mind got control, he probably would kill him."

"You mean that Algernon would kill me, then?" pointed out Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe. "Well, what is that but homicidal mania?"

"As you are quite aware, Mrs. Dashwood Coxe, I mean that *if* Algernon did go really mad, it's quite possible, indeed probable, that he might attempt to kill you."

"Then what are you boggling at?" asked the lady.

"And there's another fact to which I can swear in Court. Algernon once attacked, and nearly killed, a boy—with a stone. Flung it in his face as though he wanted to batter the poor child's brains out . . . Left him for dead, in the middle of the road—a terrible business. . . . I had just punished him severely for coming home filthy and dishevelled, with his collar and clothes torn nearly off his back—he admitted he had been fighting—when suddenly he said:

"'Oh, Mother, that boy may be dead!'

"Imagine it . . .

"And then it transpired that he had left him lying there—to bleed to death—or to be run over—or—something.

"And pray what was that but homicidal mania . . . insanity . . . unbalanced abnormality? . . . And I tell you he'd forgotten all about it until he had been whipped—an hour or more after he had come home. . . .

"He is insane, I repeat—always has been—

and subject to fits of violence accompanied by complete loss of memory and all knowledge of what he is doing.

"You know it, Doctor Desart, and I shall expect you to come into Court and testify, under cross-examination, that Algernon has always had homicidal tendencies—and would have killed his own mother. . . . If you don't do so, the world shall know that it was you who brought him to this pass and then would not lift a finger to save him. . . . For some reason you have always hated me, and you . . ."

Doctor Desart rose, rang the bell and opened the door of the room.

CHAPTER XII

ALGERNON COXE looked round the Court.

Had he been here before, or was this the place he had been dreaming about? The people seemed wonderfully real. But so they did to Alice of course—until the whole pack of cards rose up in the air.

Here was one of them rising up anyway. What was he going to do?

Why it was that chap Witherby, Sir Everard Witherby, whom Harringay had said was the best man at the Bar in a doubtful case, and absolutely infallible in one so clear and simple as this.

This was one of the most curiously coherent and consecutive dreams that he had ever had. How naturally the fellow shuffled those papers, hitched up his gown, seized the lapels of his coat and turned that deceptively humorous and kindly face up to the Jury, that he might smile to them in his friendly and confiding way, putting himself *en rapport* with them, as one wise man of the world with a dozen others.

"May it please your Lordship.

"Members of the Jury, it would cause me unbounded surprise if I were to be informed that you were satisfied that the prosecution had made out a fair case that the unfortunate girl Giovanna Blayton had been poisoned by my client.

"It is, of course, not in dispute that her murdered body was found in a box, nor that the box was discovered by my client's wife in the attic of their house.

"When this shocking discovery was made—and nobody more shocked, horrified and surprised than my client—what did he do? Precisely what any one of you, gentlemen of the Jury, would have done if you had found yourself in similar tragic and distressing circumstances.

"He gave every assistance to the police and gave the fullest and clearest explanation of how the box came to be in his possession. Later on, you will hear from his own lips the interesting and dramatic story, a true story from real life—and remember, gentlemen of the Jury, that Truth is far, far stranger than Fiction—of how that box came to be where it was.

"What he cannot tell you—for he does not know—is how the body of the murdered girl came to be in this box or trunk.

" The facts of the case are these.

" My client, a man of blameless life and character, a well-known and widely-respected member of London society, the son of the Reverend Clarence Dashwood Coxe, Rector of the parish of Melfont Parva, proposed marriage to the deceased girl, and they became engaged.

" As has happened millions of times before in the history of the world, and will happen millions of times again, the young people discovered that they had made a mistake. They had been too precipitate. As they came to know each other better, certain incompatibilities of temperament discovered themselves.

" Their habits, ways of thought, outlook on life, were not in accord. They had had widely differing education, up-bringing, environment. It is enough to say that those of the deceased girl had been, as you will learn, markedly Bohemian. . . ."

Algernon Coxe frowned as he watched the speaker.

Of course this wasn't a dream. He was back in Court again, and if this man thought that he was going to whitewash him by tarring the memory of Giovanna, he was mistaken. After all, they could only hang him if he did call out " That's a lie," in contradiction of any mis-statement concerning her. It had been his fault, and his alone.

What was the fellow saying ?

" Now, gentlemen of the Jury and ladies of the Jury, there is not one of you but will agree with me that the solemnization of a marriage between two people who have not a taste in common, who see eye to eye on no point whatsoever, and who have already begun to quarrel, is ten times worse, nay ten-thousand times worse, than the cancellation of the engagement.

" I say, and I say it without fear of contradiction, that my client did a wise, sensible and right thing when he broke off this engagement, in order to save the girl and himself from a life of married unhappiness, a life of constant jarring, friction, strife, and misery.

" It was not an easy thing to do. It was his duty—to the girl as well as to himself. It was his duty, I repeat, and he did it.

" Of course the unthinking, the ignorant, the unintelligent and the *interested*, immediately cry out :

" ' Jilt ! Philanderer ! Rascal ! Callous brute ! '

" But you, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, can estimate these parrot-cries and parrot-brains at their true worth, and can also appreciate at their true worth the courage and wisdom of my client in acting as he did.

" No moral coward he, to take the easy path and avoid the storm, the lightnings of natural

indignation from the girl and her relations, the thunders of calumny from her family and friends.

"And storms there were, of course, as my client is the first to admit.

"Storms with a rain of tears, a hail of abuse, cutting winds of scorn and reproach. . . . All very natural. Very customary. But, mark you, it was the storm before the calm. Yes, complete calm and acquiescence in the inevitable.

"And in the midst of this calm—the result either of a tardy realization of the obvious wisdom of the breaking of the engagement, *or*, gentlemen of the Jury, of the appearance on the scene of a more eligible suitor for her hand—in the midst of this calm, I say, my client receives from the girl, a letter.

"Now, gentlemen of the Jury, it is for you to realize that on this letter hangs the whole case for the defence.

"Had my client preserved that letter, there would have been no case whatsoever for the prosecution; and he, an innocent man, would not have found himself in the unfortunate position in which he stands before you to-day.

"But which of us is always wise?

"Which of us treasures and preserves every scrap of paper which might ever, possibly, or impossibly, be of any use or value?

" None of us.

" If we were to do that, we should each of us require a special building as big as a house, in which to hoard so vast an accumulation of rubbish.

" And again, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, need I point out to you, men and women of the world, men and women of understanding and experience, that a man on the eve of his wedding is very much more than likely to destroy everything in the nature of love-letters —letters written to him by another woman.

" A man so foolish as to keep letters from a former fiancée would hardly expect, or deserve, the domestic peace that he would desire.

" Of course my client did not preserve this letter, nor any other letter, that he had received from Miss Blayton.

" Is it likely that he would ?

" Would you, ladies and gentlemen ?

" Would I ?

" Would any sane and sensible person— particularly any person so conscientious, thoughtful, and considerate as my client has always shown himself to be ?

" He did not keep it.

" Alas, that he did not !

" However, it being the last letter written to him by the woman he had loved, a letter received on the eve of the day before he was

to be married, a letter that made an appeal to that kindness of heart upon which she knew she could rely—the letter, for these reasons made a quite indelible impression upon his memory.

"He read it through twice and thrice. He pondered its contents. He read it again.

"For long he sat in a state of indecision, torn between the very natural and laudable desire to do what the girl asked, and the equally natural and quite comprehensible feeling that it would be a most unwise step to take, a step that could lead to no good, nor to any real pleasure or happiness for the girl; and that it would be somewhat unfair to the lady he was to marry in two days' time.

"For in this letter, the girl asked him to visit her once more. . . .

"And thus, pondering the matter, weighing the pros and cons, reading and re-reading the letter, he came to know it practically by heart, before he came to a final decision and destroyed the document.

"Gentlemen of the Jury, my client will go into the witness-box and swear upon oath that he can remember practically every word of this letter, and, without notes, he will repeat it to you as he repeated it to his solicitor.

"Now, as you have already heard, the whole case rests upon the credibility of the existence

and contents of this letter; and, in my mind, gentlemen of the Jury, there is no doubt whatsoever that when you have heard my client in the witness-box, you will be absolutely convinced that such a letter was received by him, and that its contents were what he states them to have been.

" They were as follows.

" The writer asked, as I have said, that my client should visit her once more at her flat where she would be awaiting him, at ten o'clock on the following evening, Thursday.

" She would wait for him until eleven.

" If, for any reason, he felt he must refuse, and so would not come, would he of his kindness do her the favour of taking charge of a box into which she was packing all her most valued and treasured personal possessions, as she was going abroad and did not want to store the box where its contents—especially the pictures and embroideries—might suffer from neglect and exposure to damp, or even to water, fire, or any other destructive agency.

" A friend of hers had had a most unfortunate experience through sending just such a trunk to a repository which was first burnt and then deluged with water.

" She was quite certain he would not refuse her this small favour and, in the event of her not seeing him on Thursday night, she would

leave the box, packed, locked, and ready, in her sitting-room, to await removal.

"The front door of the flat would not be locked and the key of the door and the keys of the box would be on the mantelpiece of the sitting-room.

"Would he be so kind as to lock the flat up after him, and keep the three keys for her? She would not have dreamed of putting him to all this trouble but that her father had gone off to Italy as usual, and she had no other friend to whom she would care to entrust the box, or indeed, who had room to store it. As he was only too well aware, her friends were apt to be people of uncertain address and invisible means of support.

"And more to the same effect, as you will hear later.

"Now as you will remember, the prosecution affected to dismiss as a fabrication, my client's account of this letter—nay, his statement of its very existence.

"Why, in Heaven's name?

"What earthly reason is there to suppose that no such letter was written?

"My learned friend says that he does not believe in it.

"Well, I *do* believe in it.

"I most firmly believe that the deceased girl wrote and asked my client to come and see her,

and if he were unable to do so, to come and fetch her box of personal treasures next morning.

"Why should she not do so? She was shutting up her flat. She had just been alarmed by the story of the burning of a repository, and she knew of no-one else to whom she would care to entrust this box, or indeed, who was in a position to store it for her.

"As you have learnt, both she and her father were birds of passage, and only had a *pied-à-terre* in Cornwall, a cottage which was shut up during the winter months. She could not send the trunk to this empty house, and if, indeed, she travelled all the way to Cornwall to deposit it in this place, it would prove but a damp and unsatisfactory resting-place for such things as pictures, beautifully bound books, silks and embroideries and so forth.

"There would also be the risk of fire and of burglary. I see no shadow of improbability about the story of this letter and its contents.

"I firmly believe that the unfortunate girl wrote this letter, and that she wrote it in good faith, fully intending to pack the box as she suggested.

"What happened after she wrote the letter we do not know.

"But what we do know is that the prosecution has produced no shadow of proof that my client has not spoken the truth, the whole truth and nothing but the truth.

" Now, on the contrary, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, I am going to prove to you, to your complete satisfaction, that one half of my client's statement is true, and I invite you to say that, this being so, the other half is almost certainly true also.

" Where proofs do not exist, we have to take probabilities. And where one half of such a statement is proven true, you will agree with me as to the probability of the other half being true.

" Ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, the deceased girl *was* expecting a visit from my client at ten o'clock on that Thursday evening. As you will hear stated on oath, she dined with a man at a Soho restaurant and, after dinner, she declined his invitation to go on to the Shaftesbury Avenue night-club of which they were both habitués—a somewhat shady place of resort officially known as the *Hors Concours* Club, and to its patrons as *The Green Haddock.*

" And the reason that she gave, gentlemen of the Jury, was the fact that *she was expecting a visit from her former fiancé, Mr. Algernon Coxe, at ten o'clock that evening at her flat.*

" As you will also hear, the man accompanied her from the restaurant to her flat and stayed there until a quarter to ten.

" There is a church quite close to this flat, and the clock of this church chimes the quarter hours.

"As it struck the third quarter hour, the girl said to her companion,

"'You must clear out now. I don't want Jimmy to find you here,' or words to that effect.

"And now, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, I would draw your attention to another interesting point.

"My learned friend made much play with the fact that a liqueur known as *Crême de Noyeau* stood on the side-board in this girl's flat, and that this liqueur has a strong odour and flavour of almonds. Also that a wine-glass was found on the table, and on this wine-glass were the finger-marks of the dead girl and of my client.

"What he did not tell you was that another wine-glass was found on the mantelpiece, bearing the finger-marks of the dead girl and of the witness Boris Goudroff, the man with whom she had dined at the Soho restaurant, and with whom she had spent the evening up to a quarter to ten.

"This fact rather takes the wind out of the sails of my learned friend, unless indeed, we are to be left free to conclude that both these men poisoned the girl? And had there been half a dozen glasses, I suppose we might assume that there had been half a dozen poisoners at work?

"Now, in point of fact, my client, as I have already told you, did not go to the girl's flat that night at all.

"Whence then the finger-marks, alleged to be his, on the wine-glass?

"Ask yourselves, ladies and gentlemen.

"Is there one of you, is there anyone in this Court, who has never had occasion to say to a servant, a waiter, a companion on a picnic, to a charwoman:

"'Look here, I say, this is a dirty glass,' or

"'This glass has been put away dirty. It hasn't been washed since I don't know when.'

"What more likely, I ask you, than that in a flat of this description; a flat in which, to say the least of it, life was somewhat casual and Bohemian; a flat in which there was no neat-handed Phyllis in the shape of a severe and conscientious parlour-maid; a flat in which there was no regular maid at all, but wherein things were done haphazard and after-a-fashion by a rough-work charwoman—what more likely, I say, than that this glass, supposed to bear the finger-marks of my client, had been put away dirty, after being used by my client on some former occasion, and remained in that condition until it was again taken from the cupboard, either by the dead girl or the witness, Boris Goudroff.

"Yes, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, *by Boris Goudroff.*

"For, as we shall presently prove to you, a most clear and distinct finger-print has been obtained from that *same* glass, a print of the thumb-mark of this same Boris Goudroff.

"Very well, it being made most abundantly clear that my client was expected by the murdered girl, the inevitable conclusion is that she had written a letter asking him to come to her flat at ten o'clock on the Thursday night, precisely as my client says.

"And the truth of this half of his statement being proved, he has every right to claim your acceptance of the other half.

"Similarly, your acceptance of his statement that he did not go to the flat at all, and the obvious explanation of the finding of his finger-marks upon the glass.

"But acute-minded, shrewd, and clear-headed men and women such as you, have naturally asked yourselves the question:

"'If the accused did not visit the murdered girl's flat that Thursday evening, where *did* he go? Where was he from a quarter to ten (when Boris Goudroff—*perhaps*—left the flat) until he entered his own house and retired to bed at about midnight, as his housekeeper has testified?'

"Well, there again my client was unlucky, and there again the prosecution relies on purely circumstantial evidence—the most misleading,

the most unreliable, the most dangerous form of evidence admissible.

"He simply went out for a walk.

"It was a fine clear night. He had been sleeping very badly for some weeks—as you may well imagine in view of the strain and worry of his recent breach with the dead girl—and, having a bad headache, he determined to try and walk it off, and to get so thoroughly tired that he would be sure of getting some sleep.

"He said to himself:

"'I will walk straight on for an hour, and I will then turn about and walk back by the same route. Then I shall have walked for a couple of hours and done about eight miles. That ought to do the trick.'

"And I may tell you, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, he had a further reason—one which you will appreciate. He did not wish to be at home if the telephone-bell rang. He did not wish to pick up the receiver and hear the voice of Giovanna Blayton asking him why he had not come to see her at her flat, and imploring him to do so.

"Which of us has not done something of the sort at some time in our lives? Was it a little piece of moral cowardice on his part? If so, let us hope that none of us is ever guilty of a greater act of moral cowardice.

" Let us also hope that none of us will ever be deterred from acting with delicacy, consideration, and true gentlemanly feeling, for fear that our motives may be misconstrued and ascribed to this so-called moral cowardice.

" Be that as it may, my client, in an honest, creditable, and, not only creditable, but credible, desire to spare this poor girl's feelings, left the house, went for a walk, absented himself from home, simply and solely in order that, whoever answered the telephone, if it rang, would immediately and truthfully reply that Mr. Algernon Coxe was out.

" Unfortunately, again, for this most unfortunate man, dogged throughout, as people often are, by a series of untoward events, a consistent run of ill luck—unfortunately again, I say, it cannot be established that the deceased did telephone to my client that night.

" She may have done so, of course, for how often does it not occur that in a by-no-means deserted and untenanted house, the telephone-bell rings and rings and rings, and remains unanswered ?

" Maids and other domestics are, like the rest of us, but human ; and how often have the words been uttered in the servants' hall, as well as in other parts of the house :

" ' There's that bell ringing again . . . Oh, *let* it ring ! . . . I'm not going ! '

"Or again, how often does it not happen that, in a house comparatively full of people, the telephone-bell rings, and is heard by no one.

"A closed and curtained door; or the accident of the three or four occupants of the house happening to be in different parts of it . . . Particularly so when the only occupants are servants . . . A couple of them have gone out into the garden for a breath of fresh air. One is upstairs turning down beds or drawing blinds, another has just stepped out for a moment to the pillar-box.

"Or again, all may be in the servants' hall or maids' sitting-room, and one of them may be making a great noise while filling a coal-scuttle or doing some such thing . . . A gramophone may be playing; an organ in the street.

"Of course that bell may have rung on the fatal night, and have remained unheard, even as it remained unanswered.

"And again, setting all these obvious probabilities aside, who is to say that the deceased did not telephone to my client at an hour later than that at which his servants habitually went to bed?

"As you will learn, it was quite an unusual event for any of them to retire at a later hour than ten o'clock.

" My client always dined at seven, and it was his habit to retire to his den and read for a couple of hours or so. At about a quarter to ten, the parlour-maid would bring a tray with a jug of barley-water or lemonade and a biscuit-bowl and any letters that might have come by the last post.

" She would then utter the unvarying formula :

" 'Everything is locked up, sir. Is there anything further you require, sir ? Good-night sir,' and retire, and by ten o'clock or a few minutes after, the maids would be in bed and asleep.

" Who shall say that at any time from ten o'clock onward that telephone-bell did not ring, and that Miss Giovanna Blayton was not endeavouring to find out why her former fiancé had not acceded to her request, and to reproach him for not doing so.

" And, mark you, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, had that bell been heard and answered, the maid who attended to it would now be in this Court to tell you how the deceased rang up my client herself, thus proving that he was not at her house.

" But it was not to be.

" And, again, my unfortunate client was not to have the good luck to encounter any friend or acquaintance as he walked abroad that night.

"Had he but looked in at a club, had he but made a call upon some late-sitting bachelor friend, or entered a tobacconist's shop or a hotel bar, he would not now be standing before you in that dock.

"You see, you understand, you realize and remember, that it was not his custom to go out like this at night.

"He had no haunt, no place of call, no rendezvous, no late-sitting bachelor friend upon whom it was his habit to thus drop in, late in the evening. It was entirely foreign to his habits and his tastes to go out at night, and it was only because this was a unique occasion, a uniquely painful occasion, that he went out—to escape the sound of that fateful bell—which thus went, alas, unheard.

"And so he met nobody; he saw nobody and nobody saw him.

"Is this strange? Let any one of us, let all of us, walk out from our respective houses at ten o'clock to-night, walk right away from our wonted neighbourhood for four miles or so, returning home at midnight, and see how many of us happen to meet a friend.

"One might do it a hundred times, and, at that hour of night and darkness, meet no one whom one knew.

"Is it remarkable that my client met no one and cannot actually prove that he was in the

streets, and only in the streets, for the whole of the time between a quarter to ten, when he left the house, and midnight when he returned to it?

"But, equally, ladies and gentlemen of the Jury, my learned friend is unable to prove that my client was at the flat of the deceased girl that evening, and has made no attempt to do so.

"All that the prosecution can prove is the admitted and unconcealed fact that the body of the murdered girl was found in her own trunk in my client's house. It is for the prosecution to prove that my client had any faintest knowledge, suspicion, or idea, that this box contained her body—and this it most certainly cannot do.

"On the other hand, my client, who, as has been seen, gave the police every possible assistance the moment the shocking discovery was made, can give the clearest and simplest account of how this box with its—to him—unknown contents, came to be found concealed in his house . . ."

Again Algernon Coxe yawned heavily.

Was it possible the fellow was still talking? Good Heavens, couldn't these people take a gentleman's word for it that he had never murdered Giovanna; that he would never have injured a hair of her head? It was such a truly absurd idea.

Or *had* he murdered her and forgotten all about it ?

Certainly there had been a most terrible row, a most shocking, unseemly, and degrading quarrel and he, who hated " scenes " more than anything on earth, had undeniably been protagonist in an incredibly dreadful scene.

And, undeniably, Giovanna had goaded him to literal madness, and had herself gone uncontrollably raving mad when he, naturally and properly shocked, had told her what he thought of her conduct . . .

If that fellow would only sit down and be quiet he could remember, perhaps.

How could one recall anything clearly and coherently while that voice boomed and droned and exploded ?

What would happen if the prisoner in the dock suddenly screamed to his defending Counsel :

" Oh, for the love of God, sit down and let me think . . . I want to remember ? "

Much of what happened was fairly clear in his mind, up to the point where he had sprung to his feet in horror and shame, had rushed to the door, and Giovanna had got there before him.

Standing with her back to it and her outstretched arm pointing a finger in his very face, she had screamed :

" You beastly little Joseph. You nasty-minded, smug hypocritical canting cur. *Love !*

What do you know of love, you psalm-smiting, Bible-punching little reptile? You obscene little louse . . . I'd have saved you and made you. Made a man of you, you unclean rag. And you'd insult me so that . . . *Go*, you hound—before I kill you. . . ."

Yes, he could remember that, all right.

But why remember it? Of what are our minds composed that they should remember such things so clearly, and fail to remember things of literally vital importance.

What *had* happened after that?

If only that fellow would be quiet and let him think.

But after all, what did it matter? What mattered, now that Giovanna was dead?

Giovanna dead. Dead in his house. Dead in the box.

That terrible Box that had dogged and haunted him from his earliest years; those nightmares; that Terror that so long had stalked by night.

The Terror had stalked him—and got him—as he had always known it would.

Well, and if it had got him, and he was put to death, what is death but peace, and what is peace but Heaven?

'At this stage of the proceedings the prisoner fainted in the dock and had to receive medical assistance' . . .

CHAPTER XIII

THE Foreman of the Jury closed the door of the Jury-room and spoke at once.

What was wanted here was methodical procedure and firm, though tactful, discipline, if there were to be order instead of chaos, and business-like brevity instead of futile chatter and waste of time.

"Everything ship-shape and navy-fashion," was the motto of Captain Maxwell, R.N. (retired).

He did not know exactly what his powers were, but he was certainly going to exercise them as though they were plenary.

"Ladies and gentlemen," he began in a harsh and rasping voice. "Kindly answer to your names and sit down, in order, as I call them. It will be the order in which you sat in the Jury-box.

"Mrs. Melhuish."

The plain grey-haired gentlewoman, of about fifty-five, bowed, smiled, and seated herself. She looked, if possible, more tired than she had looked at the beginning of the trial.

"A good sort that. Sensible," said Captain

Maxwell to himself, but only just to himself, for he was developing the bad habit of thinking aloud.

"Mrs. Balister Wynn."

The smart, dyed and painted person of the type, for some reason, termed "Society Woman" nodded and seated herself at the table beside Mrs. Melhuish. She looked, if possible, more bored than she had done at the beginning of the trial.

"For Heaven's sake, let's get it over," she murmured.

"Jumping Jezebel!" said Captain Maxwell, almost soundlessly. "Soon squash her."

"Mr. Frankling Damier."

The man who vaguely reminded the Foreman of the late Mr. Oscar Wilde, whom he had once met, murmured:

"Present and correct," in a slightly mocking manner, and sat down.

"I see you're *present*, anyhow," replied Captain Maxwell, only partly to himself.

"Mr. William Snett."

The very fat man, who reminded Captain Maxwell of a certain ex-Sergeant-Major of Marines, and who now either owned or managed 'a nice little pub in Plymouth,' responded to his name with a wheezy—

"That's me, sir," and distrustfully lowered himself to the inadequate-looking chair.

" Thirty days double physical-drill, medicine-ball and round-the-deck running," frowned Captain Maxwell, as he glanced at the man.

" Mr. John Jackson."

The red-faced grey-haired man with a good rugged face, unadorned by a ragged grey moustache, nodded to the Foreman and took his seat.

Captain Maxwell liked the look of him.

" Sure, if slow," he murmured.

" Mrs. Everton."

At this juror, the Foreman took a good look, for, like most sailors, he had an eye for a pretty woman.

And she was a pretty woman, by Jove ; just his sort. Big blue eyes, nice fair hair and complexion. Kind, gentle. Nice woman. Married. Blast the fellow.

" Miss Brighte."

Help ! What a contrast ! Bite you in the stomach if you contradicted her. Looked like a suffragette. Well, he'd stand no nonsense from her.

" Mr. Arlington."

" *Mr. Arlington !* . . . Sure your name is Arlington ? " enquired Captain Maxwell, as the dapper tall elderly gentleman suddenly came to life and turned a Wellingtonian nose, rather than an enquiring eye, toward the Foreman.

"Er, yes," he said. "Yes, sir. My name is Arlington."

"Splendid," replied Captain Maxwell, quite audibly. "Keep it up," and he indicated a chair next to that occupied by Miss Brighte.

"Slow but not sure," he murmured.

"Mr. Punker."

The bearded old man, with unkempt hair, skipped forward, bowed low and washed his hands with invisible soap.

"I am Mr. Punker," he announced.

"Well, sit down, Mr. Punker, if you please," replied the Foreman, and added, but so inaudibly that only Mrs. Melhuish heard him:

"Wallah. Mr. Punkah-wallah. A Soapy Sam."

"Mr. Brown."

"Aye," said Mr. Brown, the hard-faced man of middle age, whose face, long-lipped, firm-mouthed and big-chinned, expressed obstinacy in every line.

"Slow and quite sure," observed Captain Maxwell.

"And Mr. Brabazon."

The languid youth drooped into a seat and sighed.

"I'd like to make you . . ." thought the Foreman, "*jump*."

The last word he uttered aloud, and everybody not unnaturally did so.

His eleven colleagues being now seated, five on one side and six on the other of the long, narrow table, Captain Maxwell, standing, delivered a brief address.

"Ladies and gentlemen," said he, "we all want to get this most painful business finished as soon as possible.

"The first thing to do, is to find out whether there is any difference of opinion. If there is none, we shall be finished in a few minutes. I want those of you who have clearly and definitely made up your minds, one way or the other, to say so . . . No. Wait, please. We mustn't all speak at once.

"Will those who find the prisoner Guilty, beyond any shadow of doubt, please stand up."

Immediately five jurors rose to their feet.

Captain Maxwell sat down and wrote on the paper containing the list of names.

"Mrs. Balister Wynn," he said, and put a "G" opposite her name.

"Yes, certainly," said the smart woman whose paint-work, as Captain Maxwell termed it, was over-bright.

"Mr. Frankling Damier," murmured Captain Maxwell as, without replying to her remark, he glanced at the lady's neighbour.

"Guilty," said that gentleman. "Quite obviously."

The Foreman marked his list and looked at

the third juror; and a close observer might have fancied he saw on his face an expression of fulfilled expectation as he said,

"Miss Brighte," and put a "G" opposite to her name.

"Of course the brute murdered her," snapped Miss Brighte, who trembled, apparently with irrepressible rage, and moistened dry lips.

"It is absolutely . . ."

"Mr. Punker," interrupted Captain Maxwell, and as Miss Brighte remained standing, motioned her to her chair with the curt remark:

"Presently, please."

"Yes, sir, I am Mr. Punker, sir," replied the hairy ancient. "I find the murderer thoroughly guilty."

Mr. Melhuish, the juror nearest to Captain Maxwell, was seen to smile again at something the Foreman said to himself. It sounded like:

"The Guilty generally are thoroughly guilty, Mr. Punkah-wallah."

"And Mr. Brabazon," he added, again marking his list.

"Quite," murmured Mr. Brabazon and drooped deeper in his chair.

Captain Maxwell stood up again.

"That gives us five certainties . . . Now, I want those who feel absolutely clear and certain in their own minds that the prosecution has failed to prove the prisoner guilty . . . No.

Please do *not* speak all at once. We shall all have our say afterwards, as we are not agreed . . . Will those who are quite sure that they wish to return a verdict of Not Guilty, stand up."

One juror arose.

"Mrs. Everton," smiled Captain Maxwell, and put "N.G." against the name of the pretty woman whose kind and gentle face expressed deep protest and commiseration.

"Oh, I'm sure he wouldn't do a thing like that," she said as she sat down again.

"Someone done it, any'ow," observed the fat man, and shook his head and cheeks and chins in approval of his own sapience.

Captain Maxwell eyed the fat man coldly, and the latter's head, at least, ceased to wag.

"Now," said the Foreman, "we have five clear verdicts of Guilty and one of Not Guilty . . . Five jurors besides myself have not expressed an opinion. They must decide one way or the other.

"After that, the minority must change its opinion and agree with the majority or else I must tell the Judge that we cannot agree."

"What happens then?" enquired Mr. Punker.

"We shall be kept here until we do agree, Mr. Wallah," replied the Foreman.

"What, all night?" queried Mr. Punker, in apparent alarm.

"Yes, and all day too, Mr. Wallah," answered the Foreman with apparent satisfaction.

"My name is Punker, sir, and not Waller. and I most certainly think . . ." began Mr, Punker, clearing his throat, but got no further, for the Foreman intimated that Mr. Punker's thoughts would be required of him later, and in due course.

"As I was saying," continued Captain Maxwell, "those who have not voted, must do so . . . I will ask those who have given their verdicts to favour us with their reasons for the conclusions to which they have come. That should help the undecided to make up their minds. When they have heard the others, they must decide one way or the other, and record their verdicts of 'Guilty' or 'Not Guilty.'

"Mrs. Balister Wynn."

"I? Well, I mean to say . . . Don't see how there can be any two opinions about it. The gairl's body was found in his house. He'd had a frightful row with her, and he wanted her out of the way. Probably couldn't have married the other woman if there'd been any scandal . . . Breach of promise and all that . . . Shouldn't be surprised if the gairl was in trouble and all that."

"Ah!" exploded Mr. Punker. "*I* thought of that."

The Foreman looked at him.

"You would," he whispered.

"Nothing of the sort in the evidence," he continued aloud and brusquely, turning to Mrs. Balister Wynn.

"Not the sort of thing the prosecution would have omitted . . . Home Office Pathologist's autopsy . . ."

"Shouldn't be surprised, I say," reaffirmed that lady. "Anyhow, when you find a gairl's body in the house of the man who has a motive for murdering her, and only a silly cock-and-bull story to account for it, well, I mean to say, why waste time?"

And the lady shut her mouth with a snap, opened her handbag with another, and, producing a mirror, considered the effect of all this upon her complexion.

"Brass and paint-work," observed Captain Maxwell, looking at Mr. Frankling Damier.

"*What?* I beg your pardon?" enquired that gentleman.

"I asked you to be so good as to tell us why you have decided that the accused is guilty," replied the Foreman.

"W-e-e-l-l," said Mr. Frankling Damier, "I think Mrs. Balister Wynn has really said it all. Said the last word. Put the matter in a nutshell and all that. Don't know that I've anything to add, you know."

"Well then, kindly repeat it all, since it's what you think; if you'll be so good, Mr. Wilde," said Captain Maxwell.

"My name's Frankling Damier," observed that gentleman.

"Quite so; we know it. I've got it down here," the Foreman assured him. "Yes, your name is Mr. Frankling Damier and you find the prisoner Guilty because . . . ?"

"W-e-e-l-l, as Mrs. Balister Wynn said, it's obvious, isn't it? He makes love to this gel. How far it goes, we don't know. Then he gets tired of her, and then along comes a gel with money and he jilts the first gel. She treats him to a scene, and no doubt threatens him with all sorts of punishment and revenge. The gel disappears, and where do you find her? In a box up in his attic, and the feller can only spin a rumtifoo yarn about thinking it was a box of clothes he fetched away . . . *Of course* he did it. Don't see what there is to waste time about."

"Smoke?" he added, drawing a gold diamond-monogrammed cigarette-case from his pocket and offering it to Mrs. Balister Wynn.

It was evident to all present that the time of Mr. Frankling Damier, like that of Mrs. Balister Wynn, was valuable.

Without awaiting the Foreman's invitation, Miss Brighte sprang to her feet.

"Of course the brute's guilty," she said.

"And there are far too many of these brutal and dastardly murderers of innocent women undiscovered and unpunished. What we want is not only women Jurors, women Solicitors and women Barristers, but women Judges. Yes, women on the Bench. And when we have a woman Prime Minister, as most certainly we shall, some day, we shall have . . ."

"May we, before that happens, have your reasons for finding the prisoner guilty?" interrupted the Foreman.

"My reasons? The same as any other sane person's reasons. Because it's perfectly obvious that the man's guilty. If he weren't, why can't he explain how the poor soul's body came to be in the box?

"Why, it would have been a more convincing tale if he'd tried to make out that that painter-fellow murdered her, stuffed her body into the box, and then forged a letter asking him to come and fetch it. . . . How can anyone doubt for a moment that this man Coxe is guilty, when he confesses everything except the actual murder? . . .

"If the letter that he got from the poor soul was admittedly in her own writing, are we to be asked to suppose that the painter fellow Boris What's-his-name knew the contents of the letter, and thought it would be a bright idea to kill her and put her body in the box, so as to

put the blame on to the other man? Is it likely?"

"Quite," murmured Mrs. Everton, ambiguously.

"Quite what?" snapped Miss Brighte.

"Quite likely," replied Mrs. Everton and apologized to the Foreman for interrupting.

The Foreman beamed his forgiveness.

"Rot and rubbish!" commented Miss Brighte. "I've never heard such nonsense in my life. You might as well say the Russian fellow and this man Coxe did it between them."

Miss Brighte wiped her lips and the Foreman hurriedly called upon the name of Mr. Punker, consulting, as he did so, his list to see that he had got the name correctly.

"Guilty, sir. I find this murderer entirely guilty," announced Mr. Punker, "and for the following reasons.

"He murdered his unfortunate fiancy because he had got tired of her and, mark you, that didn't happen until a richer woman came along. As the gentleman said in Court, blinded by wealth and deaf to her entreaties not to do such a thing, he poisoned her. He administered the fatal dose and then looked round for somewhere to dispose the body. And what did his eye fall upon? His fiancy's travelling-trunk and into this he disposed her.

"And what did he do then?

"Cool as you please, he calls a taxi, and her that should have entered his house a bride, enters it a corpse. What he intended doing with it, we don't know, but murderers are like that. They don't think till it's too late, and there's the body on their hands. Probably he reckoned to bury the poor girl in the cellar one night, like Crippen, or take the box to some big railway-station and leave it in the Left-Luggage Office, like that chap that murdered a woman in his office and went out and bought a second-hand trunk and put her in it and left her at Waterloo. What I say is . . ."

"Thank you," said the Foreman. "Mr. Brabazon."

Mr. Brabazon, lying back in his chair, his hands deep in the pockets of his plus-fours, sighed.

"He did it," he said wearily. "Because if he didn't, who did? Method of residuaries."

"Residuums," snapped Miss Brighte.

Mr. Brabazon regarded Miss Brighte long and thoughtfully and less as though she were the maggot in the walnut than as though she were half the maggot in the apple.

He then closed his eyes, bereft of speech.

Captain Maxwell did not close his eyes, though he narrowed them and looked as though he regretted that he, too, was, at that time and place, bereft of speech of the best naval brand.

"Now," he said, rising to his feet, "those who have definitely given their verdict as 'Guilty' have given us their reasons for doing so, and I hope this has been of some help to the undecided. I will now ask Mrs. Everton if she will be so kind as to favour us with her reasons for deciding that the prisoner is 'Not Guilty.'"

"Oh, I'm afraid I haven't anything worthy to be called reasons," replied the very pretty woman, flushing warmly.

"I just feel he isn't. He doesn't look like a murderer . . ." She halted, overcome with shyness and confusion.

"I believe very few murderers do, as a matter of fact," smiled Captain Maxwell encouragingly. "Fashions change so, you know. It's the same with burglars and prize-fighters. Most refined people nowadays."

Mrs. Everton laughed.

"Still," she said, "my intuition or instinct, or whatever one should call it, tells me he's innocent."

"Very safe guide in ordinary matters, I'm quite sure," said Captain Maxwell. "But I wonder if you could find any reasons for this intuition."

"Well," replied Mrs. Everton, "as I've already said, he doesn't look as though he could carry out a cold-blooded and deliberate

murder, even if he wanted to. Nor does he look the sort of man who would want to.

"Secondly, I don't think the prosecution has shown sufficiently strong motive for a murder. I mean, you don't go and murder anybody because they've said they'll tell people you've jilted them, or because they are threatening you with a breach of promise action.

"Thirdly, I believe he was desperately in love with her the whole time . . ."

"Who has not often wished to kill a woman, even while he loved her?" asked Mr. Brabazon, the languid youth, sighing deeply, as in remorse for all those whom he had loved and killed.

"Fourthly, I don't think the man is any more of a fool than he is of a murderer," continued the pretty woman, "and if he had been going to kill this poor girl, surely he'd have thought of some better way of disposing of her body than taking it to his own house."

"Ar, that's right. . . . Stoopid. . . . Silly," nodded Mr. William Snett, and set his cheeks and chins a-tremble.

"Fact is," drawled Mr. Brabazon, "it's jolly hard to commit a murder decently. Most of these murderers are absolutely unfit to be murderers. Do the absurdest rotten things. No sense. No method. Haven't the vaguest idea how to do a decent murder. Just the sort of thing they *do* do—take the corpse home.

Wonder he didn't take her home sitting on his knee, like a woman taking a kid to hospital. Rotten."

"Thank you so much," said Captain Maxwell. "But I was under the impression that you'd already favoured us. Most helpful and obliging, but . . ."

"Not at all, not at all," murmured Mr. Brabazon and, with long patience, closed his eyes once more.

"Then again everybody seems to think that his story of the letter that he received from her is absolutely false as well as feeble. . . . Well, I believe it," continued Mrs. Everton.

She stopped again, apparently overcome by shyness and the sound of her own voice.

"You don't," smiled Captain Maxwell, gently shaking his head. "I think you mean you'd *like* to believe it."

"Yes," she confessed. "That's the truth of it, I suppose. I'd like to believe it. Anyhow, I don't absolutely disbelieve it, and there's nothing actually impossible about it."

"But how? How do you mean?" asked the Foreman.

"Why, it's by no means impossible that she decided to do what thousands of other jilted and broken-hearted people have done—people who have been crossed in love—and made up her mind to travel for a time. Then, being

a woman, she'd perhaps like to leave something in his charge, just to make him remember her, something he'd keep in the house and that would be a constant reminder of herself and their love. It might be petty, perhaps . . ."

"Very feminine," observed Mr. Brabazon in his sleep.

"Perhaps so," she continued, "but very natural in the circumstances . . . Such a girl as she was . . . Quite likely she'd want to do so—partly to annoy and trouble and punish him, no doubt, but much more as a reminder . . . Yes, I think it extremely probable she'd want him to have a souvenir—something to keep her memory green."

"What, her corpse?" asked Mr. Arlington, turning his commanding Wellingtonian nose and tortoise-eyes upon the speaker.

"Oh, don't be silly," said Mrs. Everton.

"Well, while she was writing this letter, and quite intending to get Mr. Coxe to come and fetch her box of treasures—silver, bric-à-brac, pictures, books—that horrid Russian, who sounds like Boris Goudenoff, strolled in . . . He's just the sort of man who'd read the letter over her shoulder . . . And I think she was just the sort of girl who'd read it out to him if he didn't, just to make him jealous. And it did make him jealous. And he . . ."

Mrs. Everton faltered.

" Better say it if you think it, Mrs. Everton," the Foreman encouraged her. " Privileged here, I suppose."

" Why, he murdered her, put her body in the box, posted the letter and just went away leaving the box for Mr. Coxe to fetch, next morning."

" *Blimey !* " ejaculated Mr. William Snett.

Whereafter complete silence fell upon the Jury-room, while all eyes regarded the confused and unhappy speaker.

" Oh, what have I said ? " she continued. " I've accused another man of murder now . . . Still, he's a very nasty man, and appears to be a Bolshevist, too."

" And I'd kill every one of them," she added emphatically, " for what they did to that poor little prince and those harmless girls—the brute beasts."

" While freely admitting that I agree with you from the bottom of my soul, Mrs. Everton, it's my duty as Foreman of this . . ."

" Mena*jury*," said Mr. Brabazon.

" . . . Jury to remind you that it is Algernon Coxe who is being tried and not the Bolsheviks—or Boris Goudroff . . . You'd find Coxe ' Not Guilty ' because you think the girl may really have written that letter—but it's hardly likely that Boris Goudroff had cyanide of potassium handy in his pocket, just at the right moment."

"No, I suppose not," admitted Mrs. Everton.

"But it's possible," she added, "and he looks much more like a murderer, and seems a thoroughly nasty man."

"Yes, almost anything *is* possible," agreed Captain Maxwell, "but that fact tells as much against Algernon Coxe as against anybody else . . . And as for Boris Goudroff being a nasty-looking man—well, I mean to say——"

And Captain Maxwell accidentally looked at Mr. Punker—at the moment gazing at the ceiling as he explored a troublesome back tooth—and left his sentence incomplete.

"Anyhow," continued Mrs. Everton, "I've voted *Not Guilty* because, although things do look terribly black against the prisoner, I somehow don't feel that he committed the murder."

"We are much obliged to you for your exposition of your reasons, Mrs. Everton," said the Foreman, on the conclusion of that lady's remarks.

"And now I hope that the remaining jurors will make up their minds as quickly as they can, and vote one way or the other. After that, the '*Guilties*' will have to try and convert the '*Non-Guilties*' or vice versa, so that we can do our duty and give a united verdict."

"Yes, and as soon as possible," observed Mrs. Balister Wynn, and,

" Quate so," concurred Mr. Frankling Damier.

" Now," continued the Foreman, " I'm going to ask Mrs. Melhuish, Mr. William Snett, Mr. John Jackson and Mr. McIntyre to be so good as to come to a decision, after asking, of course, for any further information that I can supply, or discussing any point which they may find a stumbling-block to a decision one way or the other.

" Mrs. Melhuish."

The grey-haired, plain, weary-looking woman who, though dressed without taste and with a general effect of untidiness, was unmistakably a gentlewoman, admitted that such intelligence as she had told her that the prisoner was guilty.

" In my heart of hearts," she said, " or rather in my brain of brains, such as it is, I find the verdict is *Guilty*, but I do so hate saying it . . . I don't think women should sit on juries . . ."

" Nonsense ! Tripe ! " snapped Miss Brighte.

" . . . although I fully admit," continued Mrs. Melhuish, " that if women seek and demand equal rights with men, they should demand and receive equal duties. But even then, of course, they can't assume equal duties. They can't be soldiers and they certainly couldn't run battleships. But I'm wandering from the point."

"You are, Madam," the Foreman assured her, but quite kindly.

"Oh, well, I'm afraid I must vote *Guilty* then, but I shan't sleep quietly for months to come, and I'm afraid I shall see that poor young man's face as long as I live."

"And what about the poor murdered girl's face?" enquired Miss Brighte angrily.

"Yes, exactly," admitted Mrs. Melhuish. "It's because he murdered her that we are murdering him, and somehow I don't feel that two murders are better than one."

"Got to protect ourselves against such people, haven't we?" asked Mr. Punker.

"Oh, yes," again admitted Mrs. Melhuish. "I'm going to vote for your protection . . . I beg your pardon for saying that, but . . . Yes, Mr. Foreman, *Guilty*."

And taking a handkerchief from her bag, Mrs. Melhuish wiped her eyes, while the Foreman of the Jury placed a "G" against her name on his list.

"Thank you," he said. "You, at any rate, have the satisfaction of knowing that you've done your duty, however painful."

"Satisfaction!" said Mrs. Melhuish, dabbing her eyes. "Oh, don't . . ."

"Mr. William Snett," said the Foreman.

The fat man, who had been sitting bolt upright, arms akimbo, and fists, thumbs ex-

tended, planted firmly on his enormous thighs, turned his face toward the Foreman and peeped at him from the ambush of his fat.

"Well, Guv'nor," he said huskily. "I'm a kind-'earted man and I 'ope I'm a sportsman, neither of which wants to 'ang so much as a dawg, let alone an 'uman bean. Nice-lookin' young feller, too. Still, none the more and none the less, we can't 'ave people going about poisonin' people and stuffin' 'em in boxes and takin' 'em 'ome and puttin' 'em up in the attic like that . . .

"I 'ad a cosy little 'ouse up North with a good market-day trade with 'ot lunches. 'Ead-quarters of the County Shove-'apenny League it was, and there used to be a dawg . . ."

"Guilty or Not Guilty?" interrupted the Foreman.

". . . as came regler with 'is master a farmer that fair took to me owin' to a pat on the 'ead and a biscuit and dawgs bein' understandin' animals, and what with one thing and another I bought 'im off the farmer. And wot did 'e turn out to be? A sheep-worrier! Couldn't keep 'im off it. Got shot twice 'e did. But would I 'ang that dawg? No."

"Guilty or Not Guilty?" interrupted the Foreman.

"Oh, guilty as you like, but I wouldn't 'ang 'im. I sold 'im. Sold 'im to an old girl as

lived lonely, and said there was one thing about a dawg if 'e did bite the 'and that fed 'im and ate you out of 'ouse and 'ome, 'e didn't come 'ome drunk of a night, any'ow. So I sold 'im to 'er."

"To go on worrying and killing more sheep, I suppose," snarled Miss Brighte.

"Ar, that's right, Miss, but no business o' mine. Not when once I'd sold 'im. I didn't mind sellin' 'im, but 'ang 'im I wouldn't."

Captain Maxwell rose to his feet.

"Silence," he said sharply. "Stand up. Now then, do you find the prisoner *Guilty* or *Not Guilty*?"

"Me?" responded Mr. William Snett. "The prisoner? Oh, guilty," and distrustfully lowering himself back on to the inadequate chair, he blew into a red bandana handkerchief what appeared to be a few notes of the Last Post, to the strains of which the Foreman entered a "G" against the name of Mr. William Snett.

Captain Maxwell ran his eye round the company.

"Mr. John Jackson."

The burly grey-haired red-faced man with the ill-kempt moustache and rough honest face, replied in the voice of a man of breeding, education and culture:

"Well, Sir, I very greatly regret that it is not open to us to find the excellent Scots ver-

dict of Not Proven. Had the body not been found in the house of the accused, I'd rather have seen Goudroff in the dock and Coxe called by the defence as a witness.

"But as it is, I am afraid I cannot accept accused's story of a letter on the strength of which he went to the girl's flat to bring away a heavy box of odds and ends, and did so in good faith. He has the key of the flat; he has the usual incentive and desire to be rid of a troublesome mistress or fiancée; and—he has the body . . .

"Neither the defence nor anybody else suggests that the murder may have been committed by a third person, and if we have to admit that it was committed by Goudroff or Coxe, the whole weight of evidence and probability is in favour of Coxe being the murderer.

"As has been pointed out, it's absurd to suggest that Goudroff was in the habit of carrying about with him a fatal dose of a deadly poison, and produced it and used it, on seeing a private letter alleged to have been written by the deceased to the accused.

"It's all too pat; too *à propos*; too utterly improbable. I loathe to say so, but I feel that, as it's useless to say *Not Proven*, I must say *Guilty*, for I cannot conscientiously vote for turning him loose on the world as an innocent man . . . *Guilty*."

"Thank you, Mr. Jackson," said the Foreman and entered a "G" against his name.

The clean-shaven middle-aged man who looked like a successful Captain of Industry turned his strong big-chinned face, with its long upper lip and grim mouth, toward the Foreman and, in a quiet, rather musical, voice, with a marked but pleasing Scottish accent, stated that he had not yet made up his mind.

"I incline to haud that it isna proven upon him," he said. "Things look black . . . aye . . . and they found yon puir lassie's body in his hoose.

"W-e-e-l, ye'd find whisky in ma hoose—but I didna put it there and I do not drink it, for I'm a teetotaller.

"On the ither hand, the man who had the corrpse is the man wi' maist reason to wish the lassie a corrpse. Moreover, she's killed wi' a poison wi' which he's known to be fameeliar and to keep in his possession. An' I canna say his story o' yon letter sounds like gospel truth. It didna ring true in ma ears as I heard it.

"And on the ither hand, as the leddy says" —and he bowed in the direction of Mrs. Everton—"he doesna look a murderer nor sic a fule as to take the lassie's deid body home for his wife to find it. Nor do I haud that the prosecution could show a strong enough incen-

tive for sich a dastardly cruel fule murder . . . No, ma mind isna made up, and I willna say *Guilty* nor *Not Guilty* until it is."

" Not if we sit here for a week, I suppose," drawled Mr. Brabazon.

" Nor yet if ye sit here for a month, ma mannie," was the reply.

" Thank you, Mr. McIntyre," said the Foreman.

" Well, ladies and gentlemen," he continued, rising to his feet, " of the eleven of you, nine have found the prisoner ' Guilty,' one of you has found him ' Not Guilty,' and one has not yet made up his mind. . . . A very heavy majority in favour of ' Guilty.' . . .

" Now I propose that for half an hour we just relax and become informal. Any of the majority who think they have reasons and arguments which they could usefully suggest to Mr. McIntyre or Mrs. Everton might do so.

" As all the other ladies have voted ' Guilty,' they might perhaps talk to Mrs. Everton, and I would respectfully propose that they don't all do so at the same time.

" Perhaps Mr. Jackson would have a chat with Mr. McIntyre, since he also was for some time undecided, but has now made up his mind quite definitely.

" Please don't think I want to bring any sort of pressure on the minority party, but I

want Mr. McIntyre to make his decision and Mrs. Everton either to stick to hers, if she feels she must, or to come into line with the rest of us, if she feels she should."

There was a general pushing-back of chairs, a producing of cigarette-cases and pipes and a babel of conversation.

Miss Brighte and Mrs. Balister Wynn bore swiftly down upon Mrs. Everton, and the one endeavoured to convert her by shouting in her left ear while the other did so by shouting in her right.

Mrs. Melhuish held a watching brief for Justice by adding her voice whenever those of the others made a rare simultaneous pause. But as she never got beyond the words:

"And, of course, you must see, dear,"

the ends of Justice were not greatly furthered.

Mr. Jackson, offering Mr. McIntyre his cigar-case, enquired whether they should have a smoke and a chat together.

"Oh, aye," said Mr. McIntyre, accepting both suggestions.

Mr. Punker, eyeing the cigar-case, hardily drew up his chair and endeavoured to favour both gentlemen with his views, opinions, and exhortations.

Mr. Frankling Damier joined the ladies.

Mr. Arlington concentrated upon a crack in the ceiling.

Mr. Brabazon slept, and the Foreman of the Jury, from beneath the hand that shaded his eyes, regarded the animated and charming face of Mrs. Everton.

. . . . . .

Suddenly Mr. McIntyre rose to his feet and began to pace the Jury-room from end to end, entirely ignoring the remarks of any who addressed him.

Anon Mrs. Melhuish came round to where the Foreman sat patient at the head of the table.

"I think we've convinced Mrs. Everton," she said. "Her last remark was 'Well, I suppose you're right, but it's dreadful to have to condemn the poor fellow.' So no doubt she'll vote *Guilty* when you ask for final decisions."

"Thank you," replied the Foreman. "Isn't there a proverb to the effect that, 'Convince a woman against her will; And the more you convince her—she'll think so still'?

"However, we've got to give a unanimous verdict."

Babel continued, many talking and few listening.

As suddenly as he had arisen from his chair and begun pacing the floor, Mr. McIntyre halted and turned to the Foreman.

"Yon mon's guilty," he said. "'*Guilty*'s' ma vairdict."

The Foreman rapped loudly upon the table.

" Kindly take your places, ladies and gentlemen. We have now ten verdicts of *Guilty* . . . Mrs. Everton, are you still strong in your belief that the prisoner is not guilty ? "

" No, I'm sorry to say I'm not, Mr. Foreman," replied the lady addressed.

" For two reasons . . . One is that it seems to me that if you all think he's guilty you're probably right, and it's presumptuous of me to think I know better than everybody else . . .

" The other is, I've come to the conclusion that the wish has been father to the thought, and I've wished to find him innocent rather than thought that he was so. . . . So I've changed my decision."

And she, too, produced a handkerchief and dried a welling tear.

" Guilty," she added with a little snuffle.

The Foreman wished that he could go and console her, take her hand, pat her back, put his arm round her waist, draw her head on to his broad shoulder and say :

" There, there, my dear. It's a shame, but . . ."

" Hrrrmph," he barked loudly, and Mrs. Everton jumped. " Thank you, my—er—thank you, Mrs.—er . . . You are now all of one mind and unanimously return a verdict of *Guilty*."

"And you, Sir?" cried Mr. Punker avidly. "Don't you think he's as guilty—as guilty—as —Socrates himself? . . ."

"Wot did 'e do? Poison somebody, too?" asked Mr. Snett.

"No, Sir, he was himself poisoned," replied Mr. Punker weightily. "Poisoned by the Law—for corrupting the Maid of Athens. . . . Don't you think this Coxe is entirely guilty, Mr. Foreman?"

"I? Well, I haven't made up my mind," replied the Foreman of the Jury. "I'm absolutely undecided at present. . . ."

CHAPTER XIV

UP from the horrible subterranean depths and out into the dock, the prisoner, Algernon Dashwood Coxe, was brought back to hear the verdict of the Jury and the sentence of the Judge; either to hear the Foreman of the Jury say "Not Guilty," and the Judge say "You are discharged and leave this Court without a stain on your character"; or to hear the dread word "Guilty," and the voice of the Judge condemning him to death.

Anxiously, with agonized face and unconsciously imploring eyes, he scanned the faces of the Jury.

From that of the Foreman he could gather nothing. To the prisoner he looked as he supposed he must have done on the bridge of his ship, strong, assured, serene, and impassive.

The tired grey-haired untidy woman, seated next to the Foreman, gazed across at the prisoner as though searching his face once again, to reassure herself, and there to find confirmation of the conclusion to which she had come.

Her bright and bronze-haired neighbour was

repairing her countenance and endeavouring to counteract the ravages of thought and emotion, if any, incidental to her labours in the cause of Justice.

Her neighbour, the club-window lounger, consulting his watch, was apparently suggesting some superior diversion, as soon as the Court should rise and the pestilent fellow in the dock be consigned to an awful death or restored to the bosom of his family.

The fat man was staring with concentration. Evidently the show interested him even more now than it had done before.

Was it because he was gazing upon one whom he had helped to save from a ghastly fate, or was the fat brute merely gazing his morbid fill at a living corpse, a man who would go from that dock by a dreadful Via Dolorosa to the scaffold?

The man on his left, he of the ruddy countenance, grey hair and ragged moustache, looked toward him not at all. He stared at his finger-nails and looked gravely troubled.

Was this because he had acquiesced in the killing of a fellow-creature, or because, having refused to do so, he was troubled in mind, and still uncertain of the wisdom and justice of his decision?

The nice pretty woman at the end of the back row was furtively applying her handkerchief to her eyes.

Of course it must be a very painful and trying ordeal for a woman like that. Ha, ha, yes, a "trying" ordeal indeed. Damn them all, how dared they sit in judgment on him! Who were they to presume that they could assess, estimate, or understand, another person's temptations, frailties, and feelings?

Understand?

"Tout comprendre, c'est tout pardonner."

Yes, perhaps they would understand and pardon.

She would pardon whether she understood or not. If he lived, he would seek her out and ask her to give sittings to the greatest portrait-painter in the world, that he might possess a perpetual reminder and presentation of her sweet and gentle kindly face.

Those tears might well be of thankfulness that she had been able to save him, or they might just be tears induced by weariness and emotion after such a unique and painful experience.

The woman beside her stared at him gloatingly, triumphantly, but she had done that throughout the trial, apparently just for the pleasure of seeing a man in so distressing and humiliating a situation.

The somnolent old tortoise on her left still looked as though he wondered what it was all about, and why the man in the dock was still there. It would be interesting, most painfully

interesting, to put him through a searching examination and discover just how much, if anything, he had really understood.

The Aged Hare beside him, exchanging with the tortoise the respective rôles of the creatures in the fable, was still as active as ever, and as distant from any thoughts of slumber.

The long-lipped Scot had evidently made up his long-lipped mind and closed it for ever on that subject.

But his face was utterly inscrutable.

Inwardly he might be rejoicing wildly at having saved the life of an innocent man, or he might be grieving deeply at the terribly painful necessity of condemning one whom he considered to be guilty—but of outward sign of any feeling whatsoever, there was none.

Upon the face of the languid youth there almost appeared to be an expression of something other than boredom, possibly a faint gleam of pleasure at the thought that this dud show was about to end.

What had been his verdict? "Better hang wrong f'ler than no f'ler?"

Anyhow, they'd have to be unanimous, and it was unthinkable that the Foreman of the Jury, the nice woman next to him, the ruddy-faced man, and the kind pretty woman, would ever vote for the death of the unfortunate fellow-sinner whose life was in their hands.

No, the Jury would not find him guilty.

Algernon Coxe looked at the Judge.

Supposing for one foolish moment that that collection of decent kindly men and women in the Jury-box did find him guilty, which was really quite unthinkable, would that old man sitting up there in his red robe, his ermine, and his wig, sentence him to death? His face was stern and somewhat hard and cold, but that was probably merely a professional mask behind which lurked the real man, just, kindly, and merciful.

Oh, merciful Judge . . .

The quality of mercy is not strained . . . It is twice blest. It blesseth him who gives and him who takes.

What a beatified life this Judge must enjoy, participating in the fruits of the twice-blest mercy he dispensed.

The quality of mercy is not strained.

Was he saying it aloud? If so, they would think he must be mad . . . Mad! . . They would never hang a man who was mad, would they? No, he couldn't have been repeating that beautiful line aloud, or one of these warder-fellows would have told him to shut up. And the few people who were not staring at him already would have turned round and looked at him at once.

How could those fashionably-dressed women

—ladies they would call themselves, of course —there in the gallery, sit and gloat over his shame and suffering?

Of course to them it was not so much a gallery in a Court of Law as a gallery in the Theatre of Life, and from it they were watching a play that was real—a wonderfully-acted play, absolutely true to life in its stark realism.

Probably the part of the prisoner would be better acted on the stage, and the actor be much more convincing than Algernon Coxe; for he was quite a poor sort of prisoner, with nothing dramatic or interesting about him.

Just merely a perfectly ordinary person, fetched in out of the street as it were, and with neither aptitude nor training for the part of hero, or rather villain, that he had to play . . . A person wholly devoid of attraction, save for the fact that he had committed a murder, or at any rate was accused of having committed one.

Quite a poor actor, and yet the audience in the gallery stared at him apparently enthralled; silent and motionless, as though he were another Henry Irving.

Now, if they'd only look at the Judge, one could understand it. On the stage of what theatre would they see the part of Judge better acted?

Or at those bewigged lawyers. What living actors could better play the parts of prosecuting

Counsel, Counsel for the defence and Junior Counsel, than those able men with their papers and their whisperings, their hitchings-up of their gowns, their two-handed grasp of their lapels—why, there was one of them who had tipped his wig awry to scratch his head with the end of a pencil. Now what actor would have thought of that?

And the Jury, too. Could any dozen trained professional actors give a more convincing presentation of a casual collection of ill-assorted men and women gathered together to form a jury? It was really splendidly done.

But then, of course, for the matter of that, those men and women up in the gallery were really playing their parts splendidly. Not Beerbohm Tree himself could have trained a stage-crowd to behave more naturally and realistically; to wear a more enthralled thrilled look, a more avid gloating expression.

Had they no shame, no sense of decency whatsoever? Every single one of those staring men was a cad, be he who he might, and every one of those gloating women was a female cad. If they weren't, they wouldn't be there. They'd have some decent job to do in life, instead of crowding into this gloomy stuffy shabby hole to watch a fellow-creature suffer.

Supposing he had murdered Giovanna Blayton and was to be hanged for it, what business

was it of theirs, and what right had they to treat his agony as a show and spectacle, staged for their amusement ?

Talk of the decadent Romans with their cries of *Panem et circenses do* and *Christiani ad leones* ! What had two thousand years of civilization and Christianity done for this foul type, with " *Thumbs down* " stamped upon its sensual face ?

Why didn't something happen ? How long had he been here ?

Algernon Coxe glanced at his wrist-watch. Apparently for a few seconds, as the minute hand had not moved perceptibly.

With a painful effort he glanced at his mother. God, what she must be suffering, poor soul ! And how bravely she was bearing it. Erect as ever. Dignified, impressive, imposing as she had always been. A creature of a regal and commanding spirit.

What a woman !

And what a son for such a woman !

Had he hurt her, when she visited him last night, by his self-centred lack of appreciation, his failure to rise to the heights on which she moved, his inability to entertain and express the feelings appropriate to the occasion ? He could have bitten his tongue out afterwards when he remembered his doltish and selfish reply to her brave yet humble words :

"It is my punishment, Algernon. I have said '*Thy Will be done,*' but I have been too determined that *my* will should be done. I have meant for the best, but I have not paused sufficiently to be sure that my will and God's Will were one. I have sinned and this is my punishment—my heavy punishment."

And what had he answered to this humble, brave, and noble admission?

"It seems to me it's *my* punishment, Mother."

What a currish, caddish, observation.

But then, of course, he had been in prison a long time and what with confinement, anxiety, mental strain and insomnia, he had not been himself.

And there was Agatha looking more like a miserable ghost than ever.

A very different woman from his mother.

Like himself, a weaker vessel altogether.

Would he ever know whether Agatha believed, or did not believe, that he had murdered Giovanna Blayton?

The truth of the matter was that Agatha was of a thoroughly jealous nature. She had hated Giovanna, or rather she had abhorred, loathed and detested the *fact* of Giovanna Blayton.

She hated her for loving him, and probably hated him for loving, or having loved, Giovanna.

And oh, how the poor suffering creature must be loathing this dreadful business; the awful publicity, the shame, the disgrace. She must hate him for that, if not for the other. And of course, so good a woman as she was, must abhor him for murdering Giovanna as well as for loving her, if she believed that he had murdered her.

Did he kill Giovanna?

He was really beginning to forget.

That fellow down there with the thin lips and heavy black eyebrows above his thin high-bridged nose, had practically proved it beyond the shadow of a doubt.

But on the other hand the man with the chubby kindly face and misleading expression of jovial geniality, had almost persuaded him that he was innocent.

But had he persuaded that dozen of men and women in the Jury-box?

Well, one would soon know—and they looked a decent set of people.

And the Judge must certainly be kinder than he appeared.

And there is a merciful beneficent God of Love watching over us . . . And the quality of mercy is not strained.

How long had he been back in Court? He glanced at his wrist-watch. Still for only a few seconds, apparently, as, again, the minute

hand of his watch had not moved perceptibly.

What was that man saying? Who was he? The Clerk of the Court.

"Members of the Jury, have you agreed upon your verdict?"

The Foreman of the Jury was answering: "We have."

"Do you find the prisoner, Algernon Dashwood Coxe, *Guilty* or *Not Guilty* of the murder of Giovanna Giulia Francesca Bianca Orsola Blayton?"

"*Guilty of wilful murder.*"

Algernon Coxe seized the rail of the dock in front of him and summoned all his manhood to prevent himself from fainting again.

Through a bluish mist he peered at the Clerk of the Court.

"You say that he is *Guilty* and that that is the verdict of you all?"

The man was now looking at, and speaking to, him. Through the bluish darkness that was thickening about him, he could just see the man's face and, through the sound like the rushing of waters, he could just hear his voice.

"Algernon Dashwood Coxe, you stand convicted of murder. Have you anything to say

why the Court should not give you judgment of death according to law?"

Anything to say? Of course he had, but he could not say it. He was going blind; he was deaf, and his dry tongue clave to the roof of his mouth.

But of course the Judge would now intervene and tell them that, all formalities having been completed, the prisoner would be recommended for mercy, reprieved, and soon set free without a stain on his character.

He looked at the Judge and found the Judge regarding him with a heavy sad severity.

He was speaking.

"Algernon Dashwood Coxe, the Jury have found you guilty of wilful murder. It is my duty to pass sentence according to law. The sentence of the Court upon you is that you be taken from this place to a lawful prison and there hanged by the neck until you are dead."

Algernon Coxe, finding that his knees were giving way, pressed them hard against the front of the dock. He could see nothing.

But ought not the Judge now to ask:

"Algernon Dashwood Coxe, have you anything to say in stay of execution?"

Why did he not do so?

Algernon Coxe tried to speak, although he could not see.

He heard another sound that broke the deathly

stillness of the Court, the sound of someone falling heavily to the ground.

He strove to see—that he might know whether it were his mother or his wife who had fallen.

The warders led him from the dock.

THE OUTER BOOK

IS HERE CONTINUED, BEING

PART II

SERVING AS AN EPILOGUE

EPILOGUE

AND as the door of the lounge of the Pelham Club closed behind the bent and slouching form of the Reverend Clarence Coxe, Colonel Milly Mortimer turned again to Major Fortescue and Doctor John Desart, and told them the astounding story of the confession and death of their boyhood's friend, Scrub Tattinger.

After the fight with the Abyssinian, Arab, and Soudanese outlaws—slave traders, elephant-poachers, raiders, cattle-thieves and murderous brigands, whom they had held up at the water-hole, while the pursuing columns of the King's African Rifles converged upon them, Colonel Mortimer counted the costs of the action.

He found that they were quite certain to include the life of Colonel Tattinger, with whom he had been at Prep. School and Public School, and with whom he had served in the British Army and the King's African Rifles.

There was practically no hope for a man whose left shoulder was literally shattered by the great

slug of soft lead, probably split-nosed, flattened, or cupped, which, entering, had made a small hole, had mushroomed on the bone and, leaving, had torn a hole the size of a saucer.

Lacking all medical care and appliances, medicine, proper food and skilled nursing, there was absolutely no hope for a man whose condition would be critical even if he could be placed immediately in a fully-equipped hospital.

The loss of blood had been tremendous, fever was bound to follow, and the wound would become gangrenous. But death, due to weakness and shock, would probably precede that.

Colonel Tattinger, who had seen so many men die in similar condition, was under no illusion as to his chances ; and, what added to Colonel Mortimer's fear and anxiety, was the fact that his friend seemed not only to believe that he would die, but definitely to desire to do so.

Something of a doctor, from the circumstances of a life of African active service, wherein accidents, injuries from wild beasts and men, wounds, disease and death, were matters of almost daily experience, Colonel Mortimer knew that the will-to-live is the finest medicine and curative force, and a willingness-to-die the most fatal handicap.

In his experience, it was invariably the white man who, while conscious, put up a brave fight,

however serious his wounds or illness ; and the fatalistic Mussalman, Arab or Negro, who said " Kismet " and consented to death while conquering agony.

Yet here was his friend, the bravest of the brave, and typical fighting soldier, not only refusing to fight his old foe, Death, once again, but welcoming the ancient enemy with open arms.

" You'll pull through all right, Scrub," he said. " We'll get you down to Loiyan on a stretcher, and there'll be all sorts of good things there—chloroform, antiseptic stuff and lint and bandages, if not an assistant-surgeon . . . The flying columns are travelling quick and light, and haven't got a thing with 'em . . . They've all gone on after a party of the raiders who got away . . . Buck up, old chap, and take a hold. There's bound to be somebody at Marsabit if not at Loiyan, and we'll have him up as quick as a camel can go."

" No good, old chap," whispered Colonel Tattinger. " Number's up, this time . . . and I wouldn't have it otherwise. If the Havash hadn't shot me, I should probably have shot myself. I've been trying to—and trying not to—since I read that paper. It had been at the bottom of my chop-box, under some tins, for months before I saw it. I only read it on the day you joined me . . ."

"What paper?" asked Colonel Mortimer.

"Newspaper . . . *Sunday News of the Day* . . . Had an account of Algernon Coxe's trial for the murder of that girl."

"Yes, wasn't that a ghastly business? . . . Unbelievable! . . . But I don't want you to talk now. I want you to sleep. Achmet Ali is bringing some hot soup, and I'm going to put this spot of brandy in it. And I've got two tablets of morphia, thank God. A nurse gave me a tube with twelve in it, over fifteen years ago. Two left."

"Good," whispered Scrub Tattinger. "Wish it was two hundred. But I've got to tell you something first, Milly, in case I don't wake up again. And there's something I want you to do for me—something you *must* do."

"Of course I will," said Colonel Mortimer, "but you tell me all about it when you've slept."

"I'll tell you now, while I can," was the reply, "and I won't touch a thing until I've said it. I must sign a statement, too . . . You may be able to see what ought to be done . . ."

"But what can be done now, when it's all too late?" asked Mortimer.

"I'll tell you . . . Let me finish, and promise that you'll do what you can . . . That you'll do whatever you think best . . . Do *something* . . . And then you can give me

whatever you like. Only let me sleep, and, for God's sake, don't let me wake again."

"Get it off your chest, then, Scrub, only be quick. I want to get you under the morphia and down to Loiyan at the earliest possible moment."

"Yes, it won't take me long, and I must tell you while I've got the strength and my mind is quite clear.

"It's like this, Milly. You know the state I was in when I had to go home on sick leave, and they invalided me out of the King's African Rifles and out of the Army altogether . . . What with the blood-poisoning I got from that lion's scratches, and the general thin time I'd had that year, one way and another, with black-water fever, dysentery and malaria, I wasn't quite myself.

"Mind you, I don't want to make excuses . . . It's more an explanation than an excuse; but facts are facts and there it is. I was not myself.

"And I hadn't been home long, and was just beginning to crawl about once more, when down I went again, with a most pernicious go of 'flu. Talk about our tropical diseases! They are little rays of sunshine compared with 'flu.

"And yet they seem to think nothing much of it at home, though compared with the rest, it's David to Saul, for slaying its tens of thousands . . .

"But I'm wandering . . .

"Yes, I'll shout for that soup and you have the morphia and a nice sleep now, Scrub," interrupted his friend.

"Lord, how miserable I was!" continued Colonel Tattinger, "and how I loathed London. Couldn't keep warm, except by huddling over a roaring fire all day, and going to bed with two hot-water bottles at night.

"At last I got so perfectly putrid, mind, body and soul, that I thought I should go off my head and put an end to myself, if I didn't get better . . .

"Then old Long John Desart had a brain-wave, and gave me some real sound advice—saved my life.

"'Look here, Scrub,' he said, 'about nine-tenths of this is mental, you know. Active service has unfitted you for the dangers and horrors of London. Get you back to the peace and quiet of Darkest Africa, my lad. What you want is sunshine and fresh air, and the life to which you are accustomed. Go back and get up to a high and dry part, and take it easy for a bit among the lions and the elephants. You'll die of hump and misery and nothing else, if you moon about at a loose end in this fog and cold and damp.'

"By Jove, I felt a new man at once. The very idea of going back acted like a tonic, and

almost a cure. It had actually never really entered my thick skull that one could retire from the Service without retiring from Africa. Well, off I went at once and booked my passage straight away ; then home I toddled to my little flat and started packing my simple and threadbare kit . . . the ' short and simple flannels of the poor ' . . .

" How I enjoyed doing it, though I was so weak and shaky that I felt I really must have a good whisky and soda or a good cry, every half-hour ; and I can tell you I fairly counted the minutes until my ship sailed ; and you can bet it was the very first ship that was going as far as Aden. It sailed from Liverpool, and I had to go up by train.

" Like yourself, I loathe being bothered with luggage when I'm travelling, so I sent all my stuff in advance, and had absolutely nothing to take with me, as is my custom. All I had to do was to hop on to a 'bus which, passing the door of my flat, went straight to Euston.

" And here's a strange thing, Milly. I had actually rung my bell and told the ex-valet chap, who runs the house, to call me a taxi, and then I remembered this 'bus and cancelled the order. Why waste ten bob when you're a seedy, needy pensioner ? . . And if I'd taken that taxi, I shouldn't be lying here telling you this now . . .

" Well, well . . . It being a fine night, I went up on top of the 'bus—which I had all to myself—and began to feel that I was something faintly resembling a man again.

" By and by, the 'bus drew up to the side of the road and stopped; and the driver got down and shoved his head into the bonnet.

" When the conductor joined him, I called out to know whether we were likely to be held up for long, as I had a train to catch. The driver replied that five minutes would do it, for he ' knew exactly what was wrong with the innards of the old gal.'

" D'you know, Milly, I actually stood up, with the idea of going and having a look, as I know something about motor-engines; but, feeling tired and weak, I didn't do it.

" And there again—had I done so, I shouldn't be dying here now, and telling you this.

" I sat down, and, looking idly round, realized that I was in the street in which I had had a little flat when I was staying in London before going to Africa for the very first time.

" And not only that, but the 'bus, curiously enough, had pulled up outside the house.

" Once more, if the 'bus hadn't done that, I shouldn't be telling you this. If it had only gone on a few yards further or stopped a few seconds earlier . . .

" There I sat, looking at the windows of what

was once my sitting-room, and thinking what a queer thing it was that the 'bus should have stopped just at that spot.

" Yes, that was the place all right, and absolutely unchanged in all those years.

" By Jove, it brought back memories, watching the windows at which I had so often sat and looked out, with *Her* beside me.

" Memories . . . And a pain in the heart . . . And I prayed for the dam' 'bus to go on. I turned my eyes away and forced myself to think of the future instead of the past.

" I thought of the merry rocks of Aden, ' like a burnt-out Barrack stove,' and of landing at Kilindini ; trolleying along the white coral road to the Mombasa club ; lying and looking out of the window of the Uganda Railway train and seeing a real live beast again ; going to the Nairobi club and hearing the news . . . getting my safari together . . . wondering how the Wa-kamba were shaping as askaris . . .

" I was just speculating whether good old Achmet Ali would take on one more trek with me, when the light suddenly came on, in the room a few yards from where I sat.

" It was my old sitting-room, and a pretty girl had switched on the light.

" Do you know, the furniture in that room was, so far as I could see, absolutely unchanged. Certainly the arrangement was the same ; and

there, in the place where it used to be, was what looked like the identical big sofa on which I and the sweetest and loveliest . . .

" Well, it all looked the same, anyhow. And I watched the girl as she moved about my old room. And if the sight of the outside of the place had brought back painful memories, you can imagine what it was like to see that unchanged interior, with the same clock that *She* had stopped on that last night ' because it was ticking our last moments away too fast.'

" The very table at which we had had our last dinner ; that settee ; those arm-chairs . . .

" My God, it was awful.

" But do you think I could look away ? I simply could not. And I couldn't move to leave the 'bus. I wanted to, Milly, but I couldn't.

" Aren't we punished in queer ways ? Don't tell me there are such things as chance, accidents, coincidence . . . I was brought there to get my punishment and I got it.

" That very room where she and I . . .

" So I sat and watched this young girl as she moved about the room. An extraordinarily pretty girl but, I thanked Heaven, a complete contrast with my . . . my . . .

" As I watched, this girl went to the sideboard and poured out a glass of wine, or something.

" Then she went and stood beside a big open box that I had noticed directly she switched the light on. It looked like a black steel uniform-case, only bigger.

" I wasn't in the least interested in her and in what she was doing, for it was of another woman that I was thinking.

" I was seeing that room as I had seen it so many years ago, and seeing quite a different person in it with me . . .

" My gaze was just following the girl idly and subconsciously until, suddenly, she did a most extraordinary thing which promptly brought me back to the present, and caused me literally to sit up and take notice.

" Standing beside this box, she dropped something from her left hand into this glass of wine, or whatever it was, and then held it up to the light as though watching something dissolve in it. Her hand was perfectly steady, and the expression on her face calm and normal, though perhaps a little tense.

" Then she smiled, as though at some thought, raised it higher, and her lips moved as though giving a toast.

" Then she drank it off at a single draught and put the glass down on the table beside her.

" And then it was that I got the surprise, for she immediately stepped into the box, crouched

down, reached up her hand, and pulled the lid forward.

"It shut with a heavy clang and a click which I most distinctly heard through the open window.

"'Good Lord!' I said, 'that's a rum go,' and at that very moment the 'bus started forward, and was soon at top speed.

"Now, as I've told you, Milly, I was weak in body and mind, tired, stupid and feeble. If I'd been in normal health, I should certainly have hopped off that 'bus, whether I lost my train or not, got into that house somehow, and satisfied myself as to what the game was.

"But I wasn't myself and I didn't do it.

"Oh, God! Why didn't I?

"'Of course,' I told myself, 'it's a music-hall artiste practising some trick stunt . . . Vanishing lady act, or some conjuring business . . . Or it's just a lass having a lark with her young man, or her sister or mother or father or somebody. They'll come into the room in a second or two and she'll bob up and say "*Bo.*"'

"I vacillated; I hung in doubt; and I realized what a dam' fool I should look if I barged in there and found the lass sitting on the sofa with her lover . . .

"And every minute the 'bus was taking me farther and farther away; and I had my train to catch.

"If I missed it, I missed my boat, and I felt I could not go back and face another week or fortnight of London. And all my kit had gone on. I'd got nothing but what I stood up in.

"So I went on.

"And I am a murderer."

"But, my dear chap," soothed Colonel Mortimer. "Suppose you had gone in, the moment you saw the box shut; you couldn't have done anything. As I remember the case, it was a self-locking steel trunk. And besides, you remember, the keys were not there. You couldn't have done anything. She'd taken cyanide of potassium, and would have been dead in half a minute. You couldn't possibly have saved her."

"No, but *I could have saved my son*," was the reply.

"Your *son*?" ejaculated Colonel Mortimer, and then decided that his friend's mind was going already. This was delirium.

"Yes, my son," repeated Colonel Tattinger, clearly and calmly. "My son."

A brief silence.

"My son, whom I have never seen . . . My son, whose death is at my door . . . Her son and mine . . .

"God, how she must have suffered!

"It's a cruel punishment, Milly. Even if we

sinned, did we deserve this? It's too much; too *awful*. And if she sinned, is the punishment proportionate; reasonable? . . .

"To think that I could have saved our innocent boy, by getting off that 'bus!

"Could have saved his life, and could have saved Minerva from such cruel agony and suffering as few women have had to bear.

"Milly, you must let her know that the boy was innocent, for it will be some comfort, some alleviation . . .

"Or will it? . . . Won't that make it even worse—the knowledge that he died innocent, and that he suffered that torturing sense of injustice in addition to imprisonment, disgrace and death?

"Think of what that boy went through—innocent. Hanged for the murder of a girl who committed suicide! . . .

"The she-devil! . . .

"Will it help poor Minerva to know that he was innocent, or will it add to her agony, if that were possible?

"I leave it to you, Milly. Tell her or not, as you think best—but think a lot before you decide.

"But don't, *don't* let her know that it was I who could have saved the boy . . . her boy . . . our boy.

"But I suppose she'd have to know. It will

be in the papers when you see the Home Secretary, and put things in train for clearing ' Algernon Coxe's ' name and memory. That must be done for Clarence Coxe's sake, as well as for Minerva's and Algernon's.

" Not that Algernon cares now, poor boy . . . He knows . . . he knows . . .

" Milly, how shall I face my son to-night ? "

Colonel Mortimer took his friend's hand and could not speak.

" My boy . . . whom I murdered . . ."

Colonel Mortimer swallowed hard, and pulled himself together.

" You're imagining things, old chap," he whispered. " Algernon Coxe . . ."

" *My son* ; Milly. I'm going to tell you everything because I'm dying, and it's got to be told. Though I don't think I could have told it to anyone but you. You're safe, Milly. Always were one of the best ; good sound solid chap. Not like me. You wouldn't have been weak, and let her have her way. Yes, I can tell you, Milly, and you'll know what to do.

" It's a cruel legacy to leave you, but what can I do ? His memory must be cleared. I'll tell you.

" And she'll forgive me for telling you, when she learns that our boy was innocent. But then she'll know it was I who could have saved him . . . Well, she must if she must ; and I

must bear that, too . . . We shall all three meet where everything's forgiven.

" I loved her when I was a school-boy, and I hated poor Clarence Coxe because he lived in the same house and saw so much more of her than I did.

" I don't think she loved me then, nor for a long time afterwards.

" She used to tell me to wait till I was a man, whenever I proposed to her, as I did every time I saw her when I was on leave from Sandhurst and from my Regiment. She would say jokingly that perhaps she'd marry me as soon as I was a Captain, and perhaps she'd marry Clarence as soon as he was a Vicar . . . whichever of us got it first.

" I simply pestered her, and I think she began to think more of me when I was a Lieutenant, and less of an unlicked cub.

" Of course, I spent all my leaves at home, and as you know our houses were almost adjacent . . . She seemed to like me better each time that she . . .

" Then, when I suddenly got a letter ordering me to report to the Colonial Office for early embarkation for East Africa and the King's African Rifles Minerva gave way.

" She seemed to fall in love with me at last, and all of a sudden.

" I was going to be a Captain in no time, and

get a decent station like Mombasa or Nairobi or Zanzibar ; and she was coming out to wonderful Africa. Such a marvellous change for her, from humdrum Millham, where she'd lived all her life. She seemed quite carried away by the idea, and I was in the seventh heaven. We both were. We lived in an absolute delirium of joy ; a whirl of excitement and glow and glamour and love . . .

" Minerva, of whom I had always thought as being a little cold—if she had a fault at all—turned from iceberg to volcano, and I—I was *weak*, Milly, I was weak.

" It's I who should have been hanged . . . Hanging's too good for me.

" When the time came for me to go to London, she insisted on coming too, and I was weak, Milly, as I've said. And you know how strong Minerva is . . . A will as strong as mine was feeble . . .

" Minerva always had her way, and she had it then. I doubt if any man—or woman either—ever successfully opposed Minerva.

" Don't think I'm putting the blame on her, Milly. God forbid. The fault was wholly and entirely mine, for I should have been strong. It was my fault—my crime.

" And why should Minerva pay the penalty ? Why should she be punished for my weakness and my wickedness ?

"She simply told her people that she was going to London to stay with a friend—and it was true. Minerva always told the truth. *I was the friend* . . .

"You know the letter that cut my life in halves—the letter that came that day at Kinguna, when you and I were together."

Colonel Mortimer did, indeed, remember it, and how it had turned a happy, bright and cheerful youth into a bitter joyless and unhappy man, apparently of middle-age and little interest in life.

"In that letter Minerva told me that she was going to marry Clarence, and to marry him at once, in desperate haste, and for the best of good reasons. There was no time to come to Africa and track me down at the back of beyond where, perhaps, a letter could only reach me by runner, after weeks or months of travel from Nairobi. She could not and would not face the almost certain discovery.

"Fear of scandal was stronger than love of worthless Scrub Tattinger."

Silence.

"Mind you, she did love me. She loved me passionately, but . . ."

"She loved herself better," growled Colonel Mortimer.

"Not at all. Nothing of the sort. Don't say that, Milly. We're told that perfect love

casteth out fear. Well, in this case, fear cast out love. Naturally enough, too. Think of the position—and such a woman as Minerva—looked up to and admired by everybody as the model of English womanhood that she was—and is.

" It served me right. I should have been strong. If I had been, she would never have married Clarence Coxe, and my son would never have come to this dreadful end.

" ' The mills of God grind slowly, but they grind exceeding small.'

" Why couldn't I have got off that 'bus, and again why couldn't I have read an account of the trial in time to have cabled to the Home Secretary and have saved his life?

" It's something, I suppose, that I read about it before I died and can clear the boy's memory, and give her what comfort there is in knowing him to have been innocent.

" But there again, as I said before, would it be a comfort or one more stab at her poor heart, to know that the boy suffered unjustly?

" I'll tell you what, Milly. Tell the whole truth to Long John Desart. He is one of the most understanding and wisest men alive. Tell him everything, and you and he agree as to what will be the best thing to do. Decide whether to tell her that the boy was innocent, and don't spare my memory . . . No, on

second thoughts, don't spare me. Don't spare my memory in clearing my son's.

" And suppose you and Long John can't see eye to eye, call in Tubby Fortescue. He's known all of us all our lives . . . And nobody on earth—but Clarence Coxe, who must always have known it—will ever know that ' Algernon Coxe ' was my son, except you, John, and Tubby . . . And Minerva need not know that you know . . .

" I'm going a bit faint, Milly . . .

" Her letter to me is in an oil-skin cover, in that little flat tin box that's got my money and papers in it . . . It proves that Algernon is my son, if ever the question should arise—which it won't—not while Minerva's alive, anyhow.

" Now write the truth down briefly, Milly, and I'll sign it before you give me the morphia. Be quick, old chap. I keep getting a bit faint."

Colonel Tattinger died that night.

II

Doctor John Desart was shown into the dining-room of the Melfont Parva Vicarage.

To him entered Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, stately, impressive, in deepest mourning still.

"This is an intrusion, Doctor Desart," she said, as he rose to greet her, "and I wonder at your . . . your temerity, your insistence; I had almost said insolence. After my writing and wiring that you would *not* be welcome here . . . I do not ask you to sit down, nor can I offer you any hospitality."

"No, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, nor would it be acceptable. I have come in absolute sincerity and honesty, in the belief that I can serve you . . . give you a little comfort . . . peace of mind."

"*You!*" cried Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe with something as nearly approaching a bitter sneer as so well-bred and good a woman could achieve.

"*You!* You who could have saved me untold suffering by a word when I begged you, almost on my knees, to swear that,

although poor Algernon was a murderer, he was not a conscious, intentional, and responsible one."

"He was not a murderer at all. He was absolutely innocent. He *did* receive that letter. It was written by Giovanna Blayton before she committed suicide," replied the doctor.

"Rubbish! Of *course* Algernon did it. And of course you could have saved him."

"Once again, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, had I been a perjured liar and unworthy of the public position that I hold, my false testimony and lying witness would *not* have saved Algernon . . . A hundred people knew he was as sane as you or I—his maids, Giovanna's father, the taxi-man, the charwoman, the girl at the flat, and, of course, his wife, Agatha.

"I've come to tell you that Algernon was innocent, and to prove it. If you prefer to hear the story standing, it will not take very long, but I beg of you to sit down."

Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe drew herself a little more erect.

The doctor bowed.

"Very well," he said.

"In the first place, then, Algernon's father is dead," continued John Desart.

"Clarence *dead*?" cried Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe, startled and incredulous. "He left here, in the best of health, only yesterday."

"I said the boy's *father*," replied John Desart. "He is dead."

"They say that specialists get the diseases in which they specialize," she said, staring at him with hard glittering eyes.

"Meaning that I am mad?" asked Doctor Desart.

"Obviously quite mad," was the toneless reply.

"Richard Tattinger is dead," said John Desart. "He died in Colonel Mortimer's arms, and, with his last breath, told him a terrible tale. Listen and I will tell it to you.

"I will then give you two documents, one signed by Richard Tattinger and one, a letter written to him by you."

Unflinching and unfaltering, Mrs. Dashwood-Coxe heard John Desart to the end.

When he had finished, she bowed her head in pious resignation.

"Thy Will be done," she whispered.

And,

"But oh God, grant me the strength to bear this, my burden, *for Thou hast been pleased to afflict me and to try my faith* almost beyond my strength."

John Desart, for the last time, gazed upon her in sheer amazement.

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